Beast of Gévaudan

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Table of Contents

La Besseyre-Saint-Mary.....1
Versailles.....16
Dark times.....43

La Besseyre-Saint-Mary

The village of La Besseyre-Saint-Mary lay like a forgotten stone dropped into the folds of the Margeride Mountains. In the year of Our Lord 1764, it was no more than thirty stone-and-thatch houses clinging to the steep southern slope above the narrow valley of the Desges. Smoke rose thin and blue from chimneys even in midsummer, for the mornings stayed cold until the sun cleared the high ridges. To the north stretched the dark wall of the forest of Ténazeyre, mile upon mile of pine and beech broken only by granite outcrops and the occasional meadow where sheep grazed under the watchful eyes of children. To the south the land fell away toward the Allier, but few in the village ever went that far; the world ended at the next ridge.Jean Chastel rose before first light, as he had every day since he was a boy. The house was small, two rooms under a low roof of rye thatch that needed patching again this year. He slept in the larger room with Anne and the youngest three children; the older ones shared the loft above the stable.

The air inside was thick with the smell of woodsmoke, damp wool, and the faint sourness of last night’s milk curds left in a wooden bowl by the hearth.He pulled on his wool breeches and the heavy linen shirt Anne had mended so often the patches were now older than some of their children. His boots, cobbled by his own hand from cowhide, stood waiting beside the door. He moved quietly so as not to wake them. Anne stirred once, murmured something about the bread, then settled again. Her face in sleep was still soft, though the years and nine births had carved fine lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth. Jean paused a moment, watching her chest rise and fall, then turned away.Outside, the yard was mist-wet. The chickens stirred in their wicker coop, clucking low. He crossed to the stable—more a lean-to of split logs—and checked the two cows and the old mare. The cows lowed softly when they smelled him; he forked fresh hay into the manger and milked the nearer one by feel in the half-dark.The milk came warm and steady into the pail, foam rising white against the tin.

He carried it back to the house, set it on the stone shelf just inside the door, then took the wooden yoke and two buckets for water.The path to the spring wound down behind the church, past the graveyard where his parents and two infant children lay under unmarked slabs. The church itself was small, gray stone, its bell cracked years ago so that its toll

sounded more like a cough than a summons. Father Fournier, the priest from Saugues who came every third Sunday, said the bell still carried the prayers to God; the villagers were not so sure.At the spring the water ran cold and clear over mossy rocks. Jean filled both buckets, balanced the yoke across his broad shoulders, and started back up the slope. His legs took the grade without complaint; at fifty-six he was still the strongest man in the parish when it came to carrying or climbing. The other hunters said it was the devil's luck that kept him so hale, but they said it with envy more than malice. He brought in more game than any of them—deer, boar, even the occasional chamois from the high crags—and he shared the meat when times were lean.By the time he reached the house again the sky had paled to the color of skimmed milk. Smoke was rising now from other chimneys. A dog barked somewhere down the lane. Children's voices drifted from the direction of the communal oven where the women would soon be baking the week's bread.Jean set the buckets down and stepped inside. Anne was up, stirring the fire. The baby, little Marie, clung to her skirt. The twins, Joseph and Jeanne, already six, sat on the floor playing with wooden animals Jean had whittled last winter. The older boys—Pierre, eighteen, and the twins François and Antoine, sixteen—were outside splitting kindling; he could hear the steady thunk of the axe.

"Morning," Anne said without looking up.

Her voice was low, practical. "You were late last night."

"Tracking a stag up near Mont Mouchet," he answered.

"Lost the trail in the dark."

She nodded, said nothing more. She never pressed when he came home after moonset with blood on his cuffs. She had learned long ago that some questions only brought silence or anger.Jean washed his hands and face in the basin, the cold water stinging. He sat at the long oak table—scarred from thirty years of knives and elbows—and broke the last of yesterday's bread. Anne ladled barley gruel into bowls for the children. The day stretched ahead ordinary as any other: tend the garden plot behind the house, repair the fence the pigs had broken again, check the snares in the beech copse, perhaps ride to Saugues tomorrow with a haunch of venison to trade for salt and nails.Outside, the church bell gave its cracked single note. Seven o'clock. The village woke slowly around him.Jean chewed the bread and stared at the fire. There was work to do.The day was beginning.

Jean left the house after the midday meal, the taste of smoked ham still on his tongue. The afternoon sun hung high but weak, its light filtered through thin clouds that promised rain

by evening. He crossed the yard to the small pasture behind the stable, where the two cows grazed on the last of the summer grass and the old mare stood dozing under the single chestnut tree. The fence here needed attention again; the dry-stone wall had slumped in places after last winter’s freezes, letting the goats wander into the bean rows.He fetched the scythe from the lean-to, its blade already whetted that morning. The hay in the upper meadow—more weeds than true grass, but good enough for winter bedding—had been cut weeks earlier, but some patches near the wall still stood tall. Jean swung the scythe in long, steady arcs, the steel whispering through the stems. Each stroke sent a faint green scent into the air, mixed with earth and the faint musk of the animals. Sweat darkened the back of his shirt within minutes. His arms moved with the rhythm of decades: shoulders rolling, hips turning, feet planted firm on the uneven ground.When the patch was cleared he leaned the scythe against the tree and turned to the wall. Several stones had worked loose, half-buried in the turf like old teeth. He knelt, drove his fingers into the damp soil, and worked one free—a flat slab of granite the size of a bread loaf, heavy with clinging roots. He carried it to the gap, fitted it carefully, then stamped the earth down around it. Another stone followed, then another. The work was slow, deliberate; one wrong placement and the whole section might collapse again come the next thaw. By the time he finished, the sun had shifted west and his hands were black with soil.From the house Anne called the children.

“Time to wash. We’re for the church.”Jean straightened, wiped his palms on his breeches, and walked back to the yard.

The family gathered quickly: Anne in her best shawl, the twins Joseph and Jeanne scrubbed pink at the cheeks, little Marie on her hip, the older boys with their hair combed flat by wet fingers. Pierre carried a small bundle of candles they had made from beeswax scraps.The path to the church was short, uphill along the lane. Other families joined them—old Mathieu with his stick, the widow Rouquette leading her two boys, the miller’s wife with a basket of bread for the poor box. Greetings passed in low voices.

“Rain tonight, they say,” Mathieu remarked to no one in particular.

“Good for the turnips,” answered the miller’s wife. “But the roof on the oven still leaks. If we don’t patch it soon, the next batch will be half ash.”

Jean nodded. “I’ll bring stones tomorrow. We can fix it after market.”

Inside the church the air was cooler and smelled of old stone, wax, and incense. The building was plain: whitewashed walls, a wooden altar carved simply with vines and wheat sheaves, a single stained-glass window behind it showing Saint Mary in faded blue.

Twelve pews of dark oak, worn smooth by generations. A crucifix hung above the altar, its Christ carved long and thin, eyes downcast.Father Fournier had come from Saugues for the weekday Mass, as he did twice a month when the roads allowed. He stood at the altar in his worn black cassock, a small man with gray hair and a voice that carried without effort. The congregation knelt or stood as the rite required. Jean took his place beside Anne near the front, the children between them.The priest began the Mass in Latin, the familiar words rolling out like a river: Introibo ad altare Dei… Then he switched to French for the readings.

Today he read from the Book of Genesis, the story of Cain and Abel.“ ‘And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother’s keeper?’”

The words hung in the dim light.

Jean stared at the floorboards, feeling the weight of them settle somewhere deep in his chest.After the Gospel, Father Fournier spoke briefly.

“We are all keepers of one another in this valley. When the winter comes hard, when the winds come down from the high woods, we do not turn away. We share the bread, we share the watch. God sees the hand that helps and the hand that withholds.”

A murmur of agreement passed through the pews.After the blessing the congregation lingered in the aisle. Mathieu spoke to Jean as they filed out.

“The bridge over the Desges is cracking again. If the rains swell the stream, it’ll go.”

“I’ll look at it next week,” Jean said. “We can brace it with oak from the copse.”

The widow Rouquette touched Anne’s arm.

“Your Jeanne is growing tall. She’ll make a good shepherdess one day.”

Anne smiled. “If the God leaves any sheep for her to tend.”

Laughter, soft and brief, rippled among them.Outside, the sky had darkened. The first drops fell as the families scattered toward their houses. Jean walked home with his own, the children running ahead, splashing in the shallow puddles that were already forming. Anne walked beside him in silence, her shawl pulled tight.The day was ending as it had begun—ordinary, steady, bound by the small rhythms of the village.But the forest waited beyond the last house, dark and patient under the coming rain.

That evening the family gathered around the hearth as the rain pattered steadily on the thatch. The fire crackled low, casting warm orange light across the room and sending shadows dancing on the whitewashed walls. Anne sat on the low stool with little Marie on her lap and the twins Joseph and Jeanne curled at her feet. The older boys sprawled on

the bench, Pierre whittling a new spoon from a scrap of beech while François and Antoine mended harness leather. Jean sat farthest back in the big chair, his bandaged hands resting on his knees, listening.

“Tell us the story again, Maman,” Jeanne begged, her small voice bright.

“The one with the glass slipper.”Anne smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Very well. Once upon a time there lived a girl named Cendrillon…”

She spoke softly, her words weaving the old tale of the kind girl, the cruel stepsisters, the fairy godmother, and the prince who searched the kingdom with the tiny slipper of glass. The children listened wide-eyed, Marie sucking her thumb, the twins leaning forward whenever the fairy appeared in a shower of sparks. Jean watched their faces, the firelight glowing on their cheeks, and felt a rare peace settle over him. For a little while the forest and its shadows seemed far away. When the story ended with the wedding bells and the happy ever after, Anne kissed each child on the forehead.

“Time for bed now. Tomorrow is another day of work.”

The family climbed the ladder to the loft or settled into the straw pallets. Jean helped Anne bank the fire, then lay down beside her. The rain continued its gentle rhythm on the roof as sleep took them all.Dawn came gray and damp the next morning. Jean rose before the others, strapped his knife to his belt, slung the old flintlock musket over his shoulder, and slipped out into the cool air. The rain had stopped but the ground was soft underfoot. He headed north into the beech copse, then deeper into the forest of Ténazeyre, moving quietly between the trunks. He kept low, stepping carefully over roots and wet leaves, the musket ready in his hands. A good stag or boar would fill the larder for weeks.An hour’s walk brought him to the Carrefour de la Ténazeyre, the old crossroads where four faint paths met beneath a cluster of ancient pines. The air here felt strangely heavy. Jean paused, wiping his brow. His vision dimmed at the edges, as though a mist had risen inside his eyes. Sweat poured down his face and back though the morning was cool. His stomach twisted; a wave of dizziness made the trees tilt. He shook his head, muttering, “Just the damp… nothing more.”

Then the bushes on the far side of the clearing parted.A huge wolf-like beast stepped into view—larger than any wolf Jean had ever seen, the size of a young calf. Its coat was tawny, reddish-brown with a dark stripe running the length of its back. The tail was long and ended in a black tuft. Its eyes burned yellow as it fixed on him and let out a low, rumbling growl that vibrated through the ground.Jean’s hand flew to the knife at his belt. Before his fingers could close around the hilt the beast sprang. It was on him in one

bound, slamming him backward onto the wet earth. Pain exploded in his left arm as jaws clamped down, ripping through sleeve and flesh. Jean cried out, twisting violently beneath the crushing weight.

“Damn you—get off!”

The beast shook its head once, tearing deeper, then released him as suddenly as it had attacked. It bounded away into the thick pines and vanished.Jean rolled onto his side, gasping. Blood welled hot and fast from the ragged bite.

“Bastard… filthy bastard…” he cursed through gritted teeth.

He ripped a strip from the bottom of his shirt with his good hand, wrapped it tight around the wound, and knotted it with his teeth. The pain made black spots dance before his eyes, but he forced himself up and stumbled back toward the village, half-running, half-staggering along the path.He burst into the yard calling for Anne. She took one look at his blood-soaked sleeve and pale face and sat him on the bench.

“What happened? Jean, talk to me!”

“Wolf… big one,” he managed.

“In the Ténazeyre.”

She fetched water from the bucket, washed the wound clean while he hissed in pain, then smeared it thickly with her herbal ointment—comfrey, yarrow, and calendula ground with lard.

“Hold still. It’s deep but clean.”

Jean’s whole body had gone cold and clammy. He crawled into bed, shivering under the blankets though the day was mild. Sweat soaked the sheets. His eyes looked glassy and sick when Anne brought broth and water.For four long days he lay there, burning with fever, barely able to lift his head. Anne came every few hours with soup, cool cloths for his forehead, and quiet words of comfort. The children peeked in from the doorway, wide-eyed and silent. Pierre took over the milking and the garden.On the fifth morning the fever broke. Jean woke clear-headed, weak but steady. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, tested his bandaged arm, and stood. The wound throbbed but held.“I’m up,” he told Anne when she entered with breakfast. “Enough lying about. The fence still needs stones, and the cows want milking.

”She studied him a moment, then nodded.

“Slowly, Jean. Don’t push it.”

He stepped outside into the sunlight, rolled his shoulders, and picked up the scythe where he had left it days earlier. The village moved around him as before—ordinary, steady.

For a week Jean worked as though nothing had changed. He rose at dawn, milked the cows, mended the fence again where the goats had pushed through, cut more hay for winter bedding, hauled water from the spring. The wound on his arm scabbed over, the skin around it pink and tight, but the fever had left him. To the village he looked the same: broad-shouldered, steady, the man who never missed a snare or a shot.Inside, something quiet and restless had begun to build.The scents came first. The smell of wet earth after rain was no longer just earth—it was sharp, alive, layered with moss and decaying leaves and the faint musk of the goats fifty paces away. The smoke from Anne's fire carried the tang of pine resin and the sweet char of bread baking. Even the children's skin smelled different: milk and wool and the faint salt of their sweat when they ran. He caught himself lifting his head, nostrils flaring, trying to separate each thread.He stared at the forest more often now. From the yard, from the garden, from the lane, his eyes drifted to the dark line of pines on the northern ridge. The Ténazeyre seemed to pull at him, a silent longing that settled in his chest like hunger. He wanted to walk into it and keep walking until the village was gone, until the voices and the walls and the small daily burdens fell away. People began to irritate him in ways they never had before. Mathieu's slow drawl grated; the miller's wife's chatter felt like needles. Even his own family.One afternoon Joseph dropped a wooden bowl, milk splashing across the floor. Jean's hand shot out before he could stop it, cuffing the boy hard across the ear.

"Clumsy fool! Can't you hold anything?"

Joseph stared up, eyes wide and filling. Jeanne began to cry. Anne stepped between them, voice low.

"Jean. Enough."

He turned away, jaw tight, shame burning under the anger. That night at supper he snapped at Pierre for asking about the snares.

"Do it yourself if you're so eager. I'm tired of carrying everyone."

Anne said nothing, only watched him with that quiet, measuring look she had perfected over the years.He still worked. The body moved, the hands lifted stones and swung the scythe, but the mind felt heavy, tired of the same endless round. The restlessness grew sharper each day, like an itch beneath the skin he could not reach.Then came the night. After supper Jean stood up abruptly.

"I'm going hunting," he told Anne.

"Won't be back till dawn."

She looked at him across the table, the firelight catching the worry in her eyes.
“Your arm’s barely healed. Stay.”
“I need the air,” he said, already reaching for his knife and the flintlock.
“Don’t wait up.”
He stepped outside. The moon rode high and silver, washing the yard in cold light. The forest waited beyond the last house, black and deep. Jean walked toward it without hesitation, boots crunching on the path. The night air was crisp; he had walked for half an hour when his breath came faster, heavier. A low growl rumbled in his throat—unbidden, animal. He tried to swallow it down. Halfway along the beech copse his legs weakened. He limped, then staggered. The urge to run surged through him like fire in his veins. He broke into a loping trot, then faster, the gun forgotten on his shoulder. Branches whipped his face. He fell forward onto his hands and knees, retching violently onto the leaf mold. His stomach heaved again and again until nothing came but bile.Pain bloomed in his face—bones grinding, shifting. He clawed at the earth, gasping. His fingers lengthened, knuckles swelling, dark hair sprouting thick across the backs of his hands and up his arms. Fur pushed through skin in painful waves. His spine arched; a guttural cry tore from his throat as his jaw thrust forward, teeth sharpening. The change ripped through him in waves of agony and rage.When it ended he rose—not on two legs, but four. The world had sharpened: every scent exploded into color and direction. He stood upright for a moment on powerful hind legs, then dropped to all fours and ran deeper into the forest.The moon silvered the pines. He bounded over roots, through thickets, nose low to the ground. A pheasant’s trail hit him like a blow—warm feathers, fear-sweat, droppings. He tracked it silently for an hour, belly low, then spotted the pray and exploded from cover. The bird burst upward in a frantic flutter; Jean’s jaws closed around it mid-air. He tore it apart in seconds, feathers scattering, blood hot on his tongue. He devoured it raw, bones crunching, the taste wild and perfect.For hours he roamed. New trails opened to him: deer paths, fox runs, the faint spoor of other wolves that had passed weeks before. Every scent told a story—hunger, territory, flight. He ran on all fours, then reared up again, muscles coiling with unnatural strength. At last he stopped on a high outcrop, lifted his head to the moon, and howled—a deep, rolling sound that echoed through the valleys and made the night itself tremble.The forest was dark and deep, and in that darkness Jean was someone else.Until the first gray light of dawn crept through the trees. The change reversed in reverse agony: bones cracking back, fur receding, limbs shortening. He collapsed naked on the cold earth near the edge of the beech copse, exhausted, trembling. Blood and

feathers still smeared his mouth and chest.He dragged himself home through the mist, every step leaden. The house was silent. He slipped inside, washed roughly at the basin, crawled into bed beside Anne. She stirred but did not wake. Jean closed his eyes and fell into a black, dreamless sleep, the taste of raw pheasant still on his tongue.

Jean woke at first light, the taste of raw meat still faint in his mouth. He forced himself from the bed, limbs heavy, and went straight to the garden plot. The earth felt wrong under his hands—too soft, too loud with the wriggling of worms and the scuttle of beetles. Anger gnawed at him like a living thing behind his ribs. He yanked weeds with vicious jerks, tearing them out by the roots and flinging them aside.A villager—old Mathieu's nephew—walked past the low wall carrying a basket of eggs. Jean looked up. Their eyes met. The boy froze under the stare, then hurried away without a word, glancing back once as if something had chased him.Hours later Jean went inside. Anne had set a bowl of barley soup on the table. He sat, lifted the bowl, and slurped it down in silence, broth running down his chin. The spoon lay untouched.Anne watched him.
"Jean… you've been different since that fever. Quieter. Harder. The children are afraid to speak around you."
He set the empty bowl down with a thud.
"Fever's gone. Leave it."
She opened her mouth, then closed it.He rose and walked to the small field beside the house where the sheep grazed. For half an hour he stood motionless among the tall grass, eyes fixed on the animals. Their warm scent drifted to him—wool, milk, blood beneath the skin. The pull toward the forest rose like a tide in his chest. He pressed it down, fists clenched until the knuckles whitened. A low grunt escaped his gut, animal and deep. He clamped his jaw shut and swallowed it.A couple of days passed in the same tight struggle. He worked, spoke little, and fought the urges that whispered at every shadow and scent.Then came the evening when the family had gone to sleep. The house was quiet, breathing softly. Jean slipped out the door without a sound and ran.The forest swallowed him. In the dim moonlight filtering through the pines the change took him again—bones cracking, skin splitting, fur surging. Pain flared white-hot, but he welcomed it now. On all fours he loped deeper, nose to the ground.A forest trail opened ahead, narrow and winding. A girl walked alone—fourteen-year-old Jeanne Boulet from the hamlet near Les Hubacs, sent to bring the last sheep home before dark. She carried a small stick and hummed softly to herself. The werewolf smelled her first: young flesh, fear-sweat, sheep

on her clothes. He burst from the undergrowth with a savage growl. She screamed once—short, cut off—as his weight slammed her to the ground. Jaws closed on her throat. Blood sprayed hot across his muzzle. He ripped and tore, claws raking through dress and skin, dismembering her in a frenzy of growls and wet sounds. An arm came free. The head lolled at an impossible angle. He shook her like a rag doll until the screaming stopped and only the copper stink of death remained.Then it was done.He left the broken body on the trail and ran on as if nothing had happened. The night air cooled his bloodied fur. He found a patch of late berries, stripped them with his teeth, juice staining his muzzle. Farther on he dropped onto soft moss beneath an ancient beech, licked his paws clean with long, slow strokes, and rested. His deep wolf eyes stared into the black distance, unblinking, ancient.Hours slid by. The moon crossed the sky.At the first hint of gray dawn the change reversed in waves of fresh agony. Naked, shivering, he limped back toward the village. A faint restlessness and something sharper—shame—twisted inside him, but both were small beside the new hunger.The house was still silent. He climbed into bed beside Anne, pulled the blanket over his blood-flecked skin, and slept.

The rhythm had taken hold now, steady as the seasons. By day Jean was still the man of La Besseyre-Saint-Mary—broad back bent over the scythe, hands black with soil, voice low when he answered at all. He kept the urges locked behind his teeth, swallowing the growls that rose unbidden, forcing his eyes away from the dark wall of the Ténazeyre every time it called. But at night, when the house grew quiet and Anne's breathing deepened, he slipped out like a shadow and ran. His feet knew the paths now without thought. The territory had widened; he roamed not only the familiar beech copse but deeper into the Mercoire, across the high moors of Mont Mouchet, even as far as the ridges above Saugues. The forest had become his true home, vast and silent and honest.Each evening, while the sky still held a last ribbon of light, he would stand in the yard and tell Anne the same lie.

"I'm going hunting. Don't wait up."

She would look at him from the doorway, arms folded.

"Where is the gun tonight, Jean? You left it behind again."

He had the answer ready, spoken without meeting her eyes.

"I built a platform in the pines, up near the old crossroads. Keep the musket and powder there now. No sense dragging them back and forth every time."

Anne's mouth tightened.

“And the meat? You’ve brought nothing home in weeks. The children are asking. The larder’s thin.”

Jean shrugged, already turning toward the trees.

“Haven’t found any worth taking. The game’s grown wary. Tracking’s harder these days.”

She said nothing more, but he felt her gaze on his back until the forest swallowed him.He spoke to the children less and less. Pierre tried once or twice to walk with him; Jean sent him away with a curt word. The twins and little Marie learned to keep their distance when his jaw clenched and his nostrils flared at some scent only he could catch. At supper he ate in silence, staring at the fire, the old restlessness coiling tighter inside him.One afternoon alone in the barn he broke.The sheep stood tethered in the corner. Jean was forking hay when the scent of warm blood under the wool hit him like a blow. Without thinking he dropped the fork, crossed the straw in three strides, and seized the animal’s hind leg in his teeth. He bit down hard, tasting salt and wool and living flesh. The sheep bleated in terror. Jean’s hands clawed into its flank, nails digging, ripping away a strip of hide. Blood filled his mouth. The hunger roared up, sweet and red and endless.He froze.With a savage effort he tore his mouth away, spitting wool and blood onto the straw.

“No,” he hissed through clenched teeth.

“Not here. Not like this.”

The sheep staggered sideways, leg torn and bleeding. Jean backed away, chest heaving, fists pressed to his temples until the red haze faded. He bound the wound roughly with a rag, then stumbled out into the yard, wiping his mouth again and again.On Sundays the church became harder to bear.He still went when Anne insisted, sitting stiff in the worn oak pew while Father Fournier read from the Gospels. But inside his head the words sounded hollow. Corrupt officials, he thought, staring at the thin priest in his threadbare cassock. Demands their tithes and indulgences from the poor, lies to us that the world is full of light and God’s mercy. All while the real world lives in darkness, and they play at authority over us like kings in rags. The faces of the monks and priests looked ugly to him now—pale, soft, greedy. Their souls, he was sure, were the same.After two weeks he began to skip Mass whenever he could, claiming sore legs or work that could not wait. At home, when the family was out or asleep, he would stop before the small wooden cross above the hearth, spit on the floor at its feet, and mutter, “Lies. All of it.”

The anger sat deeper every day, a quiet fire no one else could see. By daylight he still wore the mask of Jean Chastel, hunter and father. But the mask was cracking, and the thing beneath it hungered for the night.

One evening a week later, as the sun dipped behind the ridges and painted the sky in bruised purples and golds, Jean told Anne the usual lie and stepped into the forest. The air was warm, heavy with the scent of resin and drying ferns. He walked fast at first, then broke into a run once the trees closed around him.The change came quicker this time, almost eagerly. Deep in a hollow of the Ténazeyre he dropped to his knees. His breath turned to ragged growls. Bones cracked and lengthened with wet, grinding sounds—spine arching, ribs expanding, legs twisting backward at the knee. Fur erupted in black waves across his chest and arms, thick and coarse. His face pushed forward into a long muzzle, teeth sharpening into yellow fangs that sliced his own gums. Claws split the ends of his fingers. The pain was fire and ecstasy at once. When it finished he stood tall on powerful hind legs for a heartbeat, then dropped to all fours, a massive tawny beast with a dark stripe running the length of his back.The world exploded into scent. He lifted his muzzle and drank it in: rabbit trails, deer musk, the distant rot of a fallen stag. He loped deeper, nose low, following invisible rivers of smell that wove through the pines. His territory had grown; tonight it reached toward the Allier valley and the scattered hamlets beyond.On a narrow forest trail near Masméjean he caught a new scent—young human, female, warm and alive. Fourteen-year-old Françoise, a shepherdess from the tiny hamlet in the parish of Puy-Laurent, had stayed too late gathering kindling for her widowed mother. She walked quickly, a bundle of sticks tied with twine across her back, humming a half-remembered hymn to keep the shadows away.Jean the werewolf burst from the undergrowth with a thunderous growl that shook the leaves. Françoise screamed, dropping her bundle. He was on her in two bounds. His jaws clamped on her throat, fangs sinking through soft skin and cartilage. Blood jetted hot across his muzzle. She thrashed, small fists beating uselessly against his chest. He shook her like a rabbit, tearing the windpipe free in a spray of red. Claws raked down her front, ripping dress and flesh in long parallel gashes. Her screams became wet gurgles. He tore an arm from the shoulder with a savage twist, then buried his muzzle in the open belly, ripping and swallowing in greedy gulps. The body jerked once, twice, then lay still in a widening pool of blood and entrails. He lifted his bloodied head, muzzle dripping, and roared into the gathering dark.Sated for the moment, he left the mangled remains on the trail and bounded onward.Deeper in the pines he met her—a sleek female wolf, gray and lean, eyes shining in the moonlight. She circled him warily at first, then lowered her head in submission. Then she slipped away into the shadows, and he felt a brief, strange contentment. He continued roaming. Trails opened

like maps in his mind. He stripped late berries from a bush, juice staining his fur, then found a bed of soft moss beneath an ancient oak. He lay down, licked his paws clean with long pink tongue strokes, and rested, deep golden wolf eyes staring into the black distance where the forest breathed around him.Hours passed. The moon crossed the sky.At the first pale hint of dawn the change reversed. Bones snapped back, fur receded in painful ripples, muzzle shortening with a wet crunch. Naked and trembling, Jean rose on two legs again. A faint restlessness and the shadow of shame twisted in his gut, but both felt small, distant. He limped home through the mist, slipped inside the silent house, and crawled into bed beside Anne. She did not stir. He closed his eyes and slept, the taste of blood still on his tongue.

The killings multiplied through the late summer and into the following year, each one feeding the growing panic that gripped every parish from Langogne to Saugues.In late August 1764, a sixteen-year-old boy working alone in the fields near the Allier valley was found at dusk. His throat had been torn out in a single savage bite; the body dragged twenty paces into the undergrowth and partly eaten, ribs exposed, one arm missing. The villagers who carried him home whispered that no ordinary wolf could have done such work.Two weeks later, in early September, a thirty-six-year-old woman was killed on her own doorstep in a small hamlet outside Saugues. She had stepped outside at twilight with a bucket to fetch water from the well. The beast came straight at her in the open yard, ripping her throat open while she still held the handle. Neighbors found her half-devoured beside the spilled bucket, blood soaking the threshold.Talk raced through the markets and along the lanes.

“Did you hear about the woman in Saugues?” a farmer asked at the communal oven in La Besseyre-Saint-Mary.

“Right on her doorstep, in daylight almost! My wife won’t go out alone anymore.”

“It’s no wolf,” his wife answered, crossing herself.

“Wolves don’t come to houses. This is the devil’s own beast, sent to punish us.”

Anne came home that afternoon white-faced.

“They say the king must send soldiers now. No one is safe after dusk. Even the children are terrified.”

Jean looked up from sharpening his knife, face calm.

“Terrible thing. Pray it ends soon.”

He said no more. In mid-October, a young shepherdess tending sheep near Chanaleilles was attacked on the forest trail at twilight. Her body was discovered the next morning, head nearly severed, belly opened, the flock scattered in blind panic. The priest in Le Malzieu buried her without full rites, the same fearful words spoken over Jeanne Boulet months before.By November the fear had deepened. A ten-year-old boy gathering wood near Villaret was taken in broad afternoon light. His small body was found mangled against a tree, throat gone, one leg carried away.At Sunday Mass—when Jean still attended—Father Fournier's voice trembled during the sermon.

"The Beast walks among us. We must repent, for surely our sins have called it forth."

Afterward, in the churchyard, the miller muttered to Jean, "Repent? What sins have our children committed? It's a monster, not God's judgment.The king in Versailles sits fat and safe while we die."

Jean nodded silently and walked home.Then came 11 February 1765. In the parish of Le Malzieu a little girl, no more than twelve years old, was partly devoured on the very day she died. Her remains were so torn that the burial was hurried before sunset. The entry in the parish register was blunt: "killed and eaten by the man-eating beast that ravages this country."

Through all these months Jean kept the mask of ordinary life. By day he milked the cows, repaired the stone walls, sat at table with his family, spoke little, and never raised his voice. No one in La Besseyre-Saint-Mary or the surrounding hamlets looked twice at the quiet hunter who sometimes left for "night hunts" and returned before dawn. The terror belonged to the forest and the shadows.But the forest belonged to him. And the nights were still his.

Early 1765 brought no relief. The Beast's hunger seemed only to sharpen.On a cold March afternoon near Lorcières, a thirteen-year-old shepherdess named Marguerite was tending her flock when the creature burst from a thicket of broom. It seized her by the neck before she could scream, dragged her thirty paces into the pines, and left her half-eaten—throat gone, belly opened, one leg carried away. The sheep scattered in every direction; two were later found with their heads torn off.Two weeks later, in the parish of Grèzes, a thirty-year-old woman named Marie was washing linen at the stream when the Beast came upon her in broad daylight. It tore her throat out with one snap, then ripped open her chest and fed while her blood stained the water red. Her husband found her an hour later, still clutching a scrap of cloth.Panic now ruled every village. In the lanes of Saugues the

women no longer went alone to the well. At night the doors were barred with heavy beams, and crosses were hung above every hearth.

“Lord have mercy,” they prayed aloud, kneeling before the small wooden crucifixes. “Deliver us from this evil. Spare our children.”

In La Besseyre-Saint-Mary, Anne knelt each evening with the twins and little Marie, tears on her cheeks.

“Holy Mary, protect us… keep the Beast from our door.”

Jean stood in the doorway and watched without a word.By April the men had had enough. In the square of Le Malzieu, the syndic called the first hunt.

“Thirty of us tomorrow at dawn,” he shouted. “Guns, pitchforks, whatever you have. We will comb the woods between here and Chanaleilles. No more waiting for the king!”

Jean was among the first to step forward.

“I’ll come,” he said quietly. “I know those trails better than most.”

They set out at first light—forty men in ragged lines, muskets loaded with whatever shot they could afford, dogs barking ahead. They beat the undergrowth for hours, shouting and firing at every shadow. Two ordinary wolves were flushed and shot; their carcasses were paraded through the villages that evening amid cheers.

“We got one of them!” old Mathieu crowed, slapping Jean on the back.

“Maybe both! The Beast is finished!”

Jean smiled faintly, eyes on the ground. “Maybe,” he murmured. Inside, the smile widened.

But the killings did not stop.In early May, near the hamlet of Julianges, a ten-year-old boy gathering mushrooms was taken at dusk. His small body was found the next morning, head almost severed, one arm missing, the rest dragged into a hollow and partly devoured.The women wept openly now in the churches.

“It is the devil himself!” cried the widow Rouquette outside the little stone chapel. “Our prayers are not enough. God has turned His face from us!”

Another small hunt was called the following week—fifty men this time, from La Besseyre-Saint-Mary and Paulhac. Jean walked beside Pierre, musket on his shoulder, face calm. They beat the Mercoire Forest for two full days, shot three more wolves, and returned exhausted and triumphant.

“See?” the miller said around the evening fire. “Wolves, nothing more. The Beast is gone.”

Jean stared into the flames. The corners of his mouth twitched once, a private smile no one noticed.Yet only days later, on the slopes above Venteuges, a young mother carrying her infant was attacked on the path home. She managed to shield the baby with her body; the Beast tore her back open to the spine and fed while the child screamed untouched beside her. Both were found at dawn—the mother dead, the baby still crying in a pool of blood.The terror deepened. Doors stayed barred even in daylight. Children no longer played beyond the last house. And still, every few weeks, another body was discovered—throat ripped, belly opened, flesh taken.Jean continued his days as before: milking, mending walls, speaking little. At night he slipped away, changed, and fed.No one in the Gévaudan ever looked at the quiet hunter from La Besseyre-Saint-Mary and wondered why the Beast never came near his village.

Versailles

In the opulent yet gloom-shrouded chambers of Versailles, where heavy velvet drapes swallowed the moonlight and candles burned low in silver sconces, King Louis XV received the latest dispatches from the remote province of Gévaudan. It was early 1765. The great gallery outside echoed faintly with the footsteps of courtiers, but inside the king's private cabinet the air hung thick with the scent of wax, perfume, and dread. Shadows stretched like accusing fingers across the painted ceilings of gods and hunts. The king, his face pale beneath layers of powder and a towering wig, sat slumped in a gilded armchair, one hand idly turning a snuffbox.A minister read aloud from the blood-stained report, voice hushed.

"Sire, the creature has claimed more than fifty lives since summer. Women and children torn apart in broad daylight. The peasants swear it is no wolf—larger than a calf, tawny with a black stripe, jaws that sever heads in a single bite. Some call it the devil's hound."

A second advisor leaned closer, candlelight flickering across his frightened eyes.

"The Bishop of Mende writes that prayers and processions have failed. The people speak openly of sorcery. If this spreads to Paris…"

Louis XV set the snuffbox down with a sharp click.

“Enough superstition. France will not be mocked by a beast in the hills. Send d’Enneval—the greatest wolf-hunter in Normandy—and his son. Let them take their pack of bloodhounds. Offer a royal bounty. End this before the whole kingdom believes we are ruled by demons.”

The orders were sealed that night and galloped southward through the darkness.Yet in the Gévaudan the horror only deepened.On the eighteenth of April, near Paulhac, thirteen-year-old Martial Charrade was found in the cattle field he tended. The boy’s body lay drained as though butchered—cheeks and one eye torn away, chest and thighs laid open in long gashes, knees dislocated where the Beast had pinned him. Flies already swarmed under the spring sun.Weeks later, outside Saint-Alban, a young mother fought like a she-wolf as the creature lunged at her three small children in the yard of her cottage. Claws raked her arms and face; she screamed and beat at it with a wooden yoke until blood ran from her own wounds. Two children she saved by throwing herself between them. The third—the smallest—was carried screaming into the pines and never found whole.Terror now walked the lanes by daylight. Women barred doors at noon. Children were kept indoors like prisoners.In the ancient stone church of Mende, Father Fournier gathered with two hooded monks in the chancel. Outside, wind moaned through the bell tower like a dying soul. Inside, only a few candles burned before the altar, their light barely reaching the carved faces of saints that seemed to weep in the gloom.

“This is no wolf of the woods, my brothers,” the priest whispered, hands trembling on the Bible.

“It is a demon given flesh, sent to punish our valley. The Lord has loosed Satan’s hound upon us.”

The younger monk crossed himself, eyes darting to the shadows.

“I heard the mother’s screams myself, carried on the wind. She fought until her blood soaked the earth, yet the Beast took her babe. What prayer can turn such evil?”

The elder monk knelt, voice low and fervent.

“More Masses. More fasting. We must process with relics and holy water through every hamlet. The devil fears the cross—let us drive him back to hell with fire and faith!”

They bowed their heads together, Latin rising in a trembling chant that echoed off the cold stone while, far beyond the walls, another distant scream pierced the night.The royal hunters were coming. But the Beast still roamed. And in the quiet house at La Besseyre-Saint-Mary, Jean Chastel went about his work by day as though the world were still ordinary, the secret fire in his blood burning brighter with every new tale of terror.

In the first days of March 1765, the famous wolf-hunter Jean d’Enneval arrived from Normandy with his son and a pack of twenty massive bloodhounds whose baying echoed like doom across the valleys. The elder d’Enneval was a thick-set man of fifty, scarred from a lifetime of kills, his face weathered like old leather and his eyes cold with certainty. His son rode beside him, younger but no less grim, carrying the heavy leashes. They set up camp near the abbey of Les Chazes and began at once.For weeks they combed the woods—day and night. The men moved in long lines through the black pines of the Ténazeyre and Mercoire, torches sputtering in the mist, hounds straining forward with noses to the ground. The forests at night were eerie beyond words: branches clawed at their cloaks like skeletal fingers, strange howls rose and fell in the distance, and every shadow seemed to breathe. The hunters’ boots sank into moss that swallowed sound; their lanterns cast only feeble pools of yellow that made the darkness beyond seem alive.One moonless night near the slopes of Mont Mouchet, the hounds suddenly went mad, baying and lunging. D’Enneval raised his lantern.

“There!” his son hissed.

Fifty paces ahead, half-hidden by low branches, stood the creature that had bitten Jean years before—the beast. It was enormous, the size of a young calf, its coat tawny-reddish with a bold dark stripe running the length of its spine, tail long and tufted, eyes glowing like hot coals. It stood motionless for one heartbeat, lips curled in a silent snarl, then bounded away with impossible grace, clearing a fallen log in a single leap and vanishing into the thicket.

“After it!” d’Enneval roared.

The hounds surged, but the beast doubled back, crossed a stream, and used the water to break its scent. The pack circled frantically, whining in confusion. The hunters crashed through brambles for an hour, tearing their clothes, lungs burning, but found only paw prints the size of a man’s hand and a foul, unnatural musk that lingered in the air.When they finally returned to camp at dawn, d’Enneval’s face was ashen.

“That was no wolf,” he muttered to his son over cold stew.

“Bigger, smarter… like something half-mutated from hell itself. The jaws, the way it moved—God help us, this is the one responsible for all the slaughter.”

They wrote the report that very morning and sent it galloping to Versailles: a vile half-mutant creature, larger and more cunning than any known beast, almost certainly the author of the killings. They begged for more powder, more men.But the creature was gone.

For the rest of their stay d’Enneval and his son tracked day and night—through fog-choked ravines, over granite ridges, into the deepest hollows—yet never saw it again. The hounds grew thin and nervous. The hunters whispered of sorcery.In June, defeated and exhausted, they packed their gear and left the Gévaudan forever.The killings did not pause even for a day.On a misty morning near Saugues, a twenty-year-old shepherdess named Catherine was found on the open pasture, her throat ripped wide open, head nearly severed, the body dragged into a ditch and partly devoured—ribs glistening white, one breast missing. Her crook lay broken beside her.Two days later, outside Paulhac, a twelve-year-old boy tending goats was taken at midday. His small body was discovered at dusk against a stone wall, face torn away, belly opened from throat to groin, entrails scattered in a grisly trail.In the villages the fear turned to whispered suspicion.

“Did you see d’Enneval’s face when he left?” a farmer muttered to his wife in the square of Le Malzieu.

“He looked like a man who had stared into the pit.”

His wife clutched her rosary.

“It’s not a beast of this world. The devil walks in flesh among us. No hunter can kill what God has loosed.”

Women gathered at the springs and wept openly.

“My little ones will not leave the house after noon,” one sobbed.

“I bar the door at twilight and pray until my knees bleed.”

Jean Chastel stood among the men listening, his face calm, a faint, secret smile hidden behind his beard. He nodded solemnly when they spoke of the failed hunt.

“A great pity,” he said quietly.

“Perhaps the next hunter will have better luck.”

By day he mended fences, milked the cows, spoke little to his family. At night he still slipped away into the forest that now belonged to him alone.

That night the house in La Besseyre-Saint-Mary grew quiet early. Anne had tucked the children into the loft and the straw pallets, whispering prayers against the dark. Jean sat by the dying fire, staring into the embers until the last flame guttered out. When Anne’s breathing deepened into sleep he rose without a sound, slipped the latch, and stepped into the cool night air.The forest called him now like an old lover. He walked the familiar path until the trees closed around him, then stopped in a small clearing deep in the Ténazeyre. The change came almost at will—no longer the ripping agony of the first times, but a

smooth, flowing surge. Bones shifted with soft cracks, fur flowed over his skin like warm water, muzzle lengthening, claws sliding free. In moments he stood tall on powerful hind legs, then dropped to all fours, a massive tawny werewolf with the dark stripe running the length of his spine.He ran.The night opened to him in a thousand vivid scents. He loped through the pines on all fours, nose low, drinking in the trails: deer musk heavy on the wind, rabbit fear lingering on the moss, the faint rot of fallen leaves. A young stag broke cover ahead; Jean gave chase in silent bounds, muscles coiling and releasing, the thrill of the hunt singing in his blood. The deer leaped a stream and vanished into thicker woods, but Jean did not mind. He slowed, walking now in utter silence, paws padding over soft moss that smelled of earth and rain. He stripped a handful of late berries from a low bush, crushing them between his fangs, juice dark on his tongue.Deeper he went, past ridges he had never crossed as a man. Then he caught it—a thin trail of smoke on the breeze, sharp with herbs and something fouler. Ahead, half-hidden among the trees, stood a small hut almost blending into the forest itself. Its walls were damp wood the exact gray-brown of the surrounding trunks, the roof thick with living moss. A rotten fence sagged around the yard where a few damp chickens scratched listlessly at the insects in the dirt.Jean rose onto his hind legs. He walked to the door on two feet and pushed it open with one clawed hand.Inside, the single room reeked of smoke, mildew, and strange potions. Half-empty vials stood on crooked shelves. A large iron cauldron sat cold in the center, its rim stained black. Bunches of drying herbs hung from the low beams like hanged men. And in the corner, by the feeble light of a single tallow candle, sat an old woman of perhaps ninety years. She wore a ragged black cloak, her feet bare and filthy. A large wart sat on her cheek, her nose was hooked and bulbous, her teeth black and rotten where they showed in a crooked smile.She looked up at the towering werewolf without fear.

“Greetings, son,” she croaked, voice like dry leaves scraping stone.

“I have been waiting for you.”

Jean stepped inside, ducking under the herbs. His growl came low and rough.

“The curse… the change. Give me a cure.”

The witch threw back her head and laughed—a wet, rattling sound that filled the tiny hut.

“No-no, there is no curing you, my child. I need you.”

She leaned forward, eyes glittering.

“That beast who bit you in the crossroads years ago… he belongs to me. My little blessing turns men into wolves when I choose. And I chose you.”

Anger surged in Jean’s chest. He took a step closer, claws flexing, but something unseen pressed against him—an invisible weight, cold and heavy, rooting him where he stood. He felt powerless, as though the air itself bound his limbs.

“I serve the Devil,” the witch whispered, smiling wider.

“And the Devil needs blood. Blood sacrifice. That is what you are for, my beautiful son. The purer the meat the better.”

The truth crashed over Jean like black water. He had not simply been cursed by chance. There were deeper, darker forces at play—the witch was only a pawn in a hierarchy of evil that stretched far beyond this forest. The Devil himself had marked him.

“Please,” he rasped, voice breaking into a human plea beneath the growl.

“End this. Free me.”

The old woman shook her head slowly.

“The Devil demands a certain number of souls. The werewolf pact cannot end before the count is full.”

“How many more must die?” Jean snarled.The witch only smiled, showing her rotten teeth, and said nothing.Jean thought of lunging, of tearing out her throat with one snap. But the same unseen power held him fast, stronger than any chain. He backed away, turned, and left the hut without another word.Outside, in the darkness between the trees, the witch’s beast stood watching him—huge, tawny, the dark stripe clear even in the gloom. Its yellow eyes met his for a long moment, unblinking, then it melted silently back into the forest.Jean dropped to all fours and ran, the weight of the pact heavy in his blood, the hunger already rising again beneath the moon.

Through the long weeks of 1765 the killings continued without mercy, each one carving another scar into the soul of the Gévaudan.On the night of the sixth, near the hamlet of Julianges, a seventeen-year-old shepherdess named Marguerite Vazeille stepped out of her family’s cottage to check on the goats. The moon was thin, the air heavy with coming rain. Jean, in his wolf form, caught her scent from half a mile away—milk, wool, young blood. He came upon her beside the stone wall. One leap, one snap of jaws at the throat, and she dropped without a cry. He fed slowly, tearing open the chest, pulling the heart free in steaming pieces while her eyes stared blankly at the stars.Three nights later, in the pastures above Saugues, a fourteen-year-old boy named Jacques was sent to bring the cows home at dusk. Jean tracked him along the muddy lane. The boy never saw the shadow that rose behind him. Claws opened his back from shoulder to hip; fangs closed

on the nape of the neck and shook until the spine cracked. The body was dragged into the ferns and half-eaten before midnight, ribs glistening white under the faint moonlight.By the end of the month the fear had become a living thing. Women no longer sang while they worked. Children were forbidden even the short walk to the spring after noon. In every village the same whispered question passed from mouth to mouth:
“When will the king’s men return? When will God remember us?”
Jean felt it all.By day he moved through his ordinary tasks like a man wading through deep water. A heaviness had settled into his bones, a weariness of the soul that made every breath an effort. He no longer liked the killings. Each time he woke in the morning with the taste of blood still on his human tongue, shame rose like bile in his throat. This is not me, he told himself while mending the fence or milking the cows. This is not the man who once loved his children and feared God.But when night came and the house grew still, something else stirred.It rose from the deepest part of him, older than memory, stronger than any prayer or guilt. A primeval force of darkness—cold, vast, hungry—that devoured his human mind the moment the moon touched the treetops. It whispered promises of freedom, of power, of belonging to the night itself. And Jean obeyed. He could not do otherwise. The force simply took the reins, and his human will folded like paper in fire.On the twenty-second of July, near the forest edge outside Chanaleilles, he killed again. The victim was a twenty-one-year-old woman named Marie-Anne, returning from visiting her sister. She carried a lantern that cast a small trembling circle of light. Jean stepped into that circle on two legs first, then dropped to all fours. She had time for one scream before his weight bore her down. He ripped the lantern from her hand, shattered it, then tore out her throat in a fountain of blood. The force made him linger, feeding on the soft organs while the night insects sang around them.Each dawn he changed back, limped home exhausted, and crawled into bed beside Anne. She never woke. He slept a deep, tired sleep—the sleep of a man whose soul was being eaten alive from within, one bloody night at a time.The Gévaudan bled on, and Jean Chastel—by day the quiet hunter, by night the instrument of something far older and darker—bled with it.

In the vast Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, the night of the royal supper blazed with a thousand candles. Crystal chandeliers hung like frozen stars from the gilded ceiling, their light splintering across walls paneled in silver and lapis, across marble floors polished to the sheen of ice. Long tables groaned beneath platters of roast pheasant glistening in butter, pyramids of sugared fruits, and rivers of Bordeaux poured from crystal decanters

into gold-rimmed goblets. The air smelled of roasted meats, orange blossom, and the faint powder of wigs.King Louis XV reclined at the head of the table, his silk coat unbuttoned, a napkin tucked carelessly into his collar. Sauce from the quail ran down his chin in a glistening trail. He laughed loudly at some jest from the Duc de Richelieu, then, still chuckling, spat a half-chewed bone onto the shoe of the nearest footman who had bent to refill his wine.

“Careful, boy,” the king said, eyes twinkling with cruel amusement.

“My spit is worth more than your whole family’s blood.”

The young servant froze, face white beneath his powdered wig, then bowed deeper.

“Yes, Your Majesty. Forgive me.”

Around the table the aristocrats exploded into fresh laughter, fans fluttering, jewels flashing. The Comtesse de Pompadour leaned back in her chair, lips curved in a perfect smile, while the Marquis de Sade toyed with a silver fork and watched the servant with lazy interest.A courier’s report lay open beside the king’s plate, the seal broken. The minister cleared his throat.

“Sire, the latest from Gévaudan. Another dozen peasants torn apart. The locals still swear it is a beast the size of a horse, with a black stripe down its back.”

The king waved a greasy hand.

“Peasants and their devils. Always the same story when they grow lazy or hungry.”

Richelieu raised his goblet.

“Perhaps it is the Devil himself, come to collect on our sins. We should strengthen the Church’s work, double the tithes, build more monasteries. Nothing scares the common folk into obedience like a good sermon on hellfire.”

Pompadour laughed softly, a sound like silk tearing.

“Oh, come now. Evil is not some horned creature slinking through the woods. Evil is boredom. Evil is the emptiness when the hunt is over and the wine runs dry. These attacks are the work of some madman—a poacher gone insane from too much solitude and bad wine. A serial killer wearing a wolf skin, nothing more.”

The table murmured agreement. The Marquis de Sade’s eyes gleamed.

“Exactly. And is that not beautiful in its way? Man reduced to his true nature—teeth and hunger. We hunt deer and boar for sport, watch them die twitching in the grass, and call it noble. Why should we be surprised when one of the lower orders does the same to his own kind? We are all beasts beneath the lace and powder.”

Louis XV wiped his chin with the back of his hand, smearing sauce across his sleeve. “Hunting,” he said, voice thick with wine, “is the purest pleasure. The moment the stag realizes it cannot escape—the wide eyes, the trembling flanks. There is honesty in that. These Gévaudan fools cry monster because they lack the stomach for honest killing. Send them Antoine, my master huntsman. Let him bring the creature’s head on a pike and be done with their fairy tales.”

Richelieu raised his glass again.

“To the hunt, then. And to the Church—may it keep the rabble frightened enough to pay their taxes.”

Laughter rolled down the table like thunder. Servants moved silently between them, refilling glasses, removing plates, eyes downcast. Outside the tall windows the formal gardens lay in perfect, moonlit order—hedges clipped sharp as knives, fountains singing silver into the night.Far away, in the dark forests of the Gévaudan, the real Beast still walked. But here, in the warm glow of Versailles, the King of France and his glittering court dined on, carefree, laughing at the distant screams they would never hear.

June 1765 brought François Antoine to the Gévaudan. The king’s chief gun-bearer and lieutenant of the royal hunt arrived at the head of a small but disciplined company—thirty picked men, horses, hounds, and wagons laden with powder and silver bullets that some whispered might pierce the devil’s own hide. Antoine was sixty-one, gray-haired, ramrod-straight in the saddle, his face carved by decades of chasing boar and stag through the royal forests. He set his headquarters at the Abbaye des Chazes and wasted no time.Day after day his men traversed the endless woods. They beat the Mercoire Forest from dawn until the light failed, waded the cold streams of the Desges, climbed the granite slopes of Mont Mouchet and Mont Grand. Reports had grown richer and stranger with every new survivor. The creature was larger than any wolf—size of a large calf, some said, or even a young cow or small horse. Its coat was tawny or russet-reddish-brown, streaked with dark lines, a prominent black stripe running the full length of its back. The tail was unusually long, ending in a black tuft. Powerful jaws, teeth like daggers, broad chest, short pointed ears, an elongated head like a greyhound’s. A few swore they had seen a white heart-shaped mark on its belly. It walked on hind legs at times, bounded enormous distances, and carried a foul stench like rotting meat and brimstone.

“Like a wolf,” the peasants kept repeating, “yet not a wolf.”

Antoine listened to every tale, nodding grimly, then drove his men harder. One twilight in the deep pines above Paulhac, the trackers found fresh prints—huge, deeper than any wolf's. The hounds began to whine and hang back. Antoine raised his hand; the column halted. Through the thinning trees they saw it.The Beast stood thirty paces away on a low rise, silhouetted against the dying light. Tawny coat glowing like old blood, the dark stripe stark as a brand, long tufted tail flicking. It turned its greyhound head and fixed them with yellow eyes. The stench rolled over the hunters—thick, choking, like an opened grave.

"Fire!" Antoine roared.

A dozen muskets cracked at once. Smoke billowed. The Beast staggered as balls struck its chest and shoulder, but it did not fall. The bullets seemed to bounce or flatten against the hide; one even ricocheted with a sharp whine and buried itself in a pine trunk. The creature gave a low, rumbling growl that vibrated through the ground, then reared onto its hind legs for a single terrible heartbeat—taller than any man—before dropping and bounding away in a single leap that carried it twenty feet into the undergrowth."After it!" Antoine shouted, spurring his horse. The men crashed after him, branches whipping their faces, boots slipping on moss. They followed the foul trail for miles through the gathering dark, lanterns swinging, hounds baying in terror. But the Beast left no blood, no broken twigs, no scent the dogs could hold. It simply vanished.They returned to camp long after midnight, exhausted, clothes torn, faces pale. Antoine sat by the fire, turning a flattened silver bullet between his fingers.

"Like a wolf," he muttered, "yet not a wolf."

Back at Versailles, King Louis XV received the latest courier in his private cabinet. Candles burned low; outside, fountains played in the moonlit gardens. He read Antoine's report twice, then leaned back in his gilded chair, fingers steepled.

"Bullet-proof," he murmured to the empty room.

"A creature that mocks our powder and our prayers."

He stared into the shadows a long moment, the laughter of the recent banquet still echoing faintly in his ears.

"Or perhaps only a madman clever enough to wear armor beneath his skin. Either way… France will not be humbled by shadows in the hills."

He sealed new orders and rang for a servant. The hunt would continue. But in the quiet of the palace, even the king felt the first cold touch of doubt.

11 August 1765 dawned gray and heavy over the Gévaudan, the sky low enough to brush the treetops. In the small hamlet of Paulhac-en-Margeride, Marie-Jeanne Vallet rose before first light as she always did. She was twenty years old, tall and strong from years of carrying water, tending sheep, and chopping wood for her widowed mother and younger siblings. Her hands were calloused, her dark hair braided tight against her neck, and her eyes carried the wary sharpness that had become common in every woman and child since the killings began.She dressed in her brother’s old wool breeches and a heavy linen shirt, then buckled on the leather belt her father had once worn as a militiaman. From the corner she took the ash spear—six feet long, tipped with a forged iron point her uncle had sharpened only the week before. No one laughed at her for carrying it anymore. The men who had once called her foolish now walked with pitchforks and muskets themselves.
“Stay close to the house today,” her mother said from the hearth, stirring barley gruel. “The Beast was seen near the Allier yesterday. Old Rouquette swears it crossed the river at dawn.”
Marie-Jeanne kissed her mother’s cheek.
“I’ll only go as far as the bridge to check the sheep on the far meadow. The spear stays with me.”
She stepped outside into the damp air. The hamlet lay quiet—doors barred, windows shuttered, no children playing in the lanes. Smoke rose thin from chimneys. She walked the narrow path that wound down to the small stone bridge over the Desges, the spear balanced across her shoulders like a yoke. The river ran low and brown after weeks without heavy rain; willows dipped their branches into the current. On the far side the meadow sloped gently upward toward the edge of the forest, where the sheep grazed under the watch of a boy who had not yet come of age to carry more than a sling.Marie-Jeanne crossed the bridge slowly, boots ringing on the worn stones. She scanned the trees constantly, ears tuned to every rustle. The fear had become part of her breathing—steady, watchful, never quite gone.Halfway across she heard it: a low, wet growl from the willows on the upstream bank. The sheep on the meadow scattered in sudden panic, bleating. Marie-Jeanne froze, spear already shifting into both hands, point forward.The Beast stepped from the shadows.It was the witch’s creature—not Jean, but the same enormous tawny beast that had bitten him years before at the crossroads. Larger than any wolf, the size of a young cow, its reddish-brown coat streaked with dark lines, a bold black stripe running the length of its back. The long tufted tail flicked once. Its greyhound head lowered, yellow eyes fixed on her. The stench rolled ahead of it—rotting flesh and sulfur,

thick enough to choke.Marie-Jeanne’s heart hammered, but her hands did not shake. She planted her feet on the bridge stones and leveled the spear.The Beast lunged.It came fast, bounding the last ten paces in one leap, jaws wide. Marie-Jeanne thrust with all her strength, driving the iron point straight into the center of its broad chest. The spear sank deep with a wet crunch; she felt the shock travel up her arms as the Beast’s weight slammed against her. It roared—a sound that vibrated through her bones—and reared back, claws raking the air inches from her face.Blood welled dark around the wound. The creature staggered, twisting violently to tear itself free. Marie-Jeanne held on for one heartbeat longer, then yanked the spear out with a sucking sound. The Beast dropped to all fours, blood streaming from the hole in its chest, then turned and fled—leaping the riverbank in a single bound and vanishing into the thick pines.She stood trembling on the bridge, spear dripping red, breath coming in short gasps. The sheep had stopped running; the boy on the far meadow stared wide-eyed across the water.Marie-Jeanne wiped sweat from her brow with a shaking hand.

“Run home,” she called to him.

“Tell them I wounded it. Tell them it bleeds.”

She walked back to the hamlet slowly, spear across her shoulders again, the iron point still dark with the Beast’s blood. By evening the story had spread from Paulhac to Saugues and beyond: the Maid of Gévaudan had faced the monster alone and driven her spear into its heart. It had fled wounded, limping into the forest.For the first time in months, a whisper of hope moved through the villages.

20 September 1765 dawned crisp and golden over the Abbaye des Chazes. François Antoine rose before the monks had finished Lauds, his breath fogging in the cloister yard. He had spent weeks studying every report, every paw print, every torn body. Today he felt the hunt closing like a noose. Sixty men—his royal company, local militia, and a handful of eager peasants—assembled at first light, muskets polished, hounds leashed and restless.They moved out in a wide crescent, beating the dense forest that bordered the abbey to the east. Antoine rode at the center, flintlock across his saddle, eyes scanning the undergrowth. By midday they had flushed three ordinary wolves and shot them cleanly; the carcasses were slung across mules. But Antoine was not satisfied. “Not this one,” he muttered to his lieutenant.

“The real devil is still out there.”

The afternoon wore on. Clouds gathered, turning the light the color of old pewter. Near a small clearing two miles from the abbey walls, the hounds suddenly went berserk, baying and lunging against their leashes. Antoine raised his hand. The line halted.There—thirty paces away beneath a massive beech—stood a wolf.It was enormous: eighty centimeters at the shoulder, fully one meter seventy in length from nose to tail, weighing close to sixty kilograms of muscle and bone. Its coat was thick and gray, shot through with silver, far larger and heavier than any wolf the Gévaudan had ever known. The jaws were massive, the chest barrel-wide. It stood motionless, watching them with pale yellow eyes.Antoine dismounted slowly.

“Steady,” he whispered.

He raised his musket, took careful aim at the point behind the shoulder, and fired.The shot cracked like thunder. The wolf staggered, blood blooming dark on its side. It turned to run, but Antoine’s second barrel followed instantly. The second ball struck true. The great animal collapsed in the leaves with a final, rattling growl.A cheer went up from the men. They rushed forward, pitchforks and knives ready, but the wolf was already dead. Antoine knelt beside it, running a hand over the massive skull.

“Le Loup de Chazes,” he said quietly.

“This must be the one.”

They skinned and gutted it on the spot, preserving the carcass with salt and herbs. The body was lashed to a sturdy litter and carried in triumph back to the abbey, then loaded onto a wagon bound for Versailles. Messengers raced ahead with the news.By the time the wagon reached the palace three days later, the court was waiting. King Louis XV himself descended the grand staircase to inspect the trophy. The huge gray wolf was laid out on a velvet-draped table in the Hall of Mirrors, its jaws propped open to show the dagger teeth. Courtiers crowded around, exclaiming.

“At last!” the king declared, clapping Antoine’s shoulder.

“The Beast of Gévaudan is slain.France is delivered.”

He ordered the carcass stuffed and mounted, to be displayed as proof of royal justice.Bonfires blazed that night across the Gévaudan. Church bells rang in Mende and Saugues. Villagers wept with relief.

“It is over,” they told one another.

“The king’s hunter has killed the monster.”

But even as the celebrations flared, another killing occurred.On the night of 22 September, near the hamlet of Les Hubacs, a twelve-year-old girl tending sheep was found with her

throat torn out and her body half-devoured. The wounds were exactly the same as all the others.The Beast—Jean Chastel in the darkness—had fed again.The fires burned lower. The bells fell silent. And in the quiet house at La Besseyre-Saint-Mary, Jean lay in his bed, staring at the ceiling, the taste of fresh blood still faint on his tongue. The king had his wolf. The Gévaudan still had its nightmare.

Two days after the body of the twelve-year-old girl was found near Les Hubacs, King Louis XV summoned the Archbishop of Paris to Versailles. The meeting took place in the king's private cabinet after midnight, the only light coming from a dozen candles and the dying fire in the marble hearth. Outside, rain lashed the tall windows. The archbishop arrived in full crimson robes, his gold cross gleaming, face grave beneath the heavy mitre.Louis XV did not offer him a chair. He stood before the fire, still wearing the silk coat stained from supper, a half-empty goblet in his hand.

"The wrong beast was slain," the king said without greeting.

His voice was low, dangerous.

"Antoine brought me a gray wolf the size of a calf and I paraded it like a trophy. The very next night a child is torn apart at Les Hubacs exactly as before. Throat ripped, body half-eaten. The murders continue. So tell me, Your Eminence—why does your God allow this mockery?"

The archbishop folded his hands inside his sleeves.

"Sire, this is no ordinary wolf, nor even an ordinary madman. The Church has seen such things before, in the dark centuries. This is a loup-garou—a man cursed by the Devil himself. In the old books, in the records of the Inquisition, they speak of those who drink from a wolf's footprint beneath the full moon, or who wear a belt of wolf-skin after signing their soul away at a crossroads. The creature walks as a man by day and becomes the beast by night. It cannot be killed by lead or steel unless the curse is first broken by exorcism and holy fire."

Louis XV stared at him, then laughed—a short, ugly sound.

"You stand there in your fine robes and speak to me of medieval fairy tales? A man who drinks from a wolf's footprint? A belt of skin? While my peasants die screaming and my huntsmen look like fools?"

He slammed the goblet onto the table, wine splashing across the polished wood.

"This is the Age of Enlightenment, Archbishop! Reason has dawned across Europe, and yet in my own kingdom you and your priests still peddle the same superstitious poison that

kept the people chained for a thousand years. I begin to wonder if this ‘Beast’ is not some creature of the Devil at all, but a killer planted among you—some monk or disgraced priest gone mad, dressed in skins, sent out to terrify the countryside so that the churches fill again with frightened peasants begging for your indulgences and your relics and your holy water!”

The archbishop’s face tightened.

“Sire, you blaspheme—”“I speak the truth!” the king roared, stepping closer.

“Your power wanes. Voltaire laughs at you from his exile, Rousseau calls you tyrants of the mind, and suddenly—oh, how convenient!—a devil-wolf appears to remind the people that they still need the Church to protect them from the dark. How many more children must die before you admit this is your doing, or at least your benefit? Strengthen the Church, you said at supper. Double the tithes. Build more monasteries. Yes, I remember. And now the blood of a little girl at Les Hubacs buys you another decade of fear and obedience!”

The archbishop drew himself up, voice cold as the rain outside.“If the king doubts the hand of God and the works of the Devil, then perhaps it is the king himself who has grown too proud for Heaven’s warning.

”Louis XV turned away, staring into the fire. The flames painted his face in shifting red and shadow.

“Get out,” he said quietly. “Send me priests who can pray, not politicians in robes. And pray yourself that the next body found is not laid at the door of your cathedral.”

The archbishop bowed stiffly and withdrew. The door closed behind him with a soft, final click.In the empty cabinet the king remained, watching the flames. Outside, the rain fell harder on the roof of Versailles, while far away in the black forests of the Gévaudan the true Beast still walked, untouched by silver, untouched by prayer, and very much alive.

19 October 1765. The forests around the Abbaye des Chazes had turned the color of rust and gold, leaves drifting like slow fire through the chill air. François Antoine had not rested since the triumph of Le Loup de Chazes. The king’s congratulations had been gracious, but the fresh killings—swift, brutal, identical in savagery—had turned triumph to ashes. Antoine knew the truth the court refused to accept: the gray wolf had been a distraction, a large but ordinary animal. The real Beast still walked. He gathered his best trackers at dawn—twelve men, the fiercest of the royal company, armed with muskets loaded with heavy shot and silvered balls for good measure. The hounds, still shaken from earlier encounters, were kept on short leashes.

“We follow the fresh spoor from the last kill near Lorcières,” Antoine told them, voice steady as iron.

“It passed this way two nights ago. If it is wounded from the Maid’s spear, or if it hungers again, we will find it today.”

They moved out in a tight line, beating the thickets along the eastern slope of Mont Mouchet. By mid-morning the hounds picked up a trail—strong, fresh, laced with that unmistakable foul reek of rot and brimstone. The men grew quiet. No one joked. The forest felt heavier, the pines closing in like silent witnesses.Near noon they reached a narrow ravine where a small stream cut through mossy rocks. The lead hound froze, hackles rising, then bayed once—sharp, terrified. Antoine raised his hand.

“There,” his lieutenant whispered, pointing.

In the shadow of a fallen beech stood two wolves: a large female, gray-brown and heavy with muscle, and beside her a half-grown pup, still gangly, eyes wide with fear. The female’s coat was matted with old blood on the left shoulder—perhaps from Marie-Jeanne Vallet’s spear weeks earlier. She bared her teeth in a low snarl, shielding the pup.Antoine studied them for a long moment. The female was big—larger than most wolves—but nothing like the monster described in every terrified report. No tawny-red coat, no black dorsal stripe, no elongated greyhound head. Just wolves. Clever, perhaps man-habituated, but wolves.

“Take them,” he ordered quietly.

The muskets cracked in near unison. The female leaped forward, jaws wide, but two balls struck her chest and shoulder. She collapsed mid-stride with a choking yelp. The pup bolted; a third shot caught it in the flank. It tumbled once, whimpering, then lay still.Silence fell, broken only by the hounds’ uneasy whining.Antoine walked forward, musket lowered. He knelt beside the female’s body, turned it over with the butt of his gun. No white heart mark on the belly, no tufted tail longer than normal. Just a big, scarred she-wolf and her young.One of the trackers spat into the leaves.

“Another false one, Captain. Like the gray at Chazes.”

Antoine stood slowly.

“Yet the scent was the same. The reek. Perhaps she ran with it… or fed from its kills.”

He looked at the men, face hard.

“We take the bodies. The king must see progress, even if it is small.”

They lashed the female and pup to poles and carried them back to the abbey. Word spread quickly through the villages: Antoine had killed the Beast’s mate and her whelp.

Some cheered weakly; others crossed themselves and whispered that the true monster would only grow angrier now.By evening the carcasses were salted and crated for the long journey to Versailles. Antoine sat alone by the abbey fire, staring into the flames.
“Another wolf,” he muttered to the empty room.
“Another lie we tell ourselves.”
In the Gévaudan the nights grew longer, the fear deeper. And somewhere in the dark woods, Jean Chastel—still wearing his human mask by day—felt the pull of the moon rising again, the primeval force stirring once more in his blood.

One crisp October evening Jean stood in the yard at La Besseyre-Saint-Mary and told Anne he was going out again.
“I’m joining the hunt for the Beast,” he said, buckling his knife belt.
“Antoine’s men need every good tracker. If I can help end this, I will.”
Anne looked up from the hearth, her face softening with quiet pride. She stepped close and touched his arm.
“My Jean. The strongest hunter in the parish. Go, then. Bring the monster’s head home and we’ll all sleep sound at last.”
She kissed his cheek, eyes shining with trust.
“Be careful. Come back to us.”
He nodded once and walked away without another word. Inside his chest something twisted—shame, perhaps, or the last faint echo of the man he had been—but the feeling was small now, easily ignored.The forest swallowed him before the moon had risen. He moved fast along the hidden paths until the moss-roofed hut appeared again among the pines, smoke threading from its chimney like a gray finger pointing at the sky.He pushed the door open without knocking.The witch sat by the cauldron, stirring something thick and black. She looked up, rotten teeth flashing in the firelight.
“When does this end?” Jean demanded, voice rough.
“How many more must I kill before your master is satisfied?”
The old woman laughed softly, the sound like dry bones rattling.
“As long as the Master needs, my son. The Devil is never sated for long.”
She leaned forward, eyes glittering like wet stones.
“Listen, and learn what you are part of. Since the seventh century, across the dark forests of Europe, the Covenant has endured. In the Black Books, in the whispered pages of the Malleus Maleficarum and the old grimoires of the Rhineland, it is written: the witch who

signs her name in blood at the sabbath receives the wolf-skin belt, the flying ointment of belladonna and wolfsbane, the power to walk as beast or woman. We are the keepers of the old pact. In times of famine mothers left their babes in the snow; we found them, cooked their small limbs in iron pots over forest fires, and ate the flesh while the parents prayed uselessly to a distant God. The snakes slithered on the dark ground and watched without blinking. The deer stood silent among the trees, eyes like black mirrors, knowing the true order of things. We danced naked under the moon at the crossroads, called the demons by their true names—Asmodeus, Belial, the Wolf-Father—and they answered with teeth and hunger."

She stirred the cauldron; the liquid hissed.

"Mankind has forgotten who rules this world. Not kings in their palaces of gold. Not priests with their crosses of silver. Nature is the true master—raw, merciless, eternal. The forest remembers. The roots drink blood and grow stronger. You are no longer a man fighting the wolf, Jean Chastel. You are the wolf wearing a man's skin for a little while longer. The darkness is already inside you. It eats the last soft parts of your soul. Soon you will not want to fight it. Soon you will not want the cure at all."

Jean felt it then—the heaviness spreading through his bones like black ink in water. The primeval force stirred deeper, warmer, almost welcome. His human side—the part that still loved Anne, still flinched at the memory of children's screams—grew thinner, weaker, like a candle guttering in wind. He no longer truly wanted to be free. The wolf form called to him now with a lover's voice.He turned without a word, stormed out of the hut, and ran into the black heart of the Ténazeyre. Branches whipped his face. The moon broke through the canopy and he howled once—long, raw, triumphant—as the last chains of his old self snapped and fell away behind him.

November slipped into December under leaden skies, and the Beast returned as though it had never left.On the night of the twenty-seventh of November, near the hamlet of Falzet, sixteen-year-old Jacques Limagne was driving the family's last two cows home along a muddy track. The moon was hidden; only the faint glow of his lantern lit the way. Jean, already changed and running on all fours, caught the boy's scent on the wind—sweat, wool, young blood. He struck from the side in total silence. One powerful leap, jaws closing on the throat before the boy could cry out. The lantern fell and shattered. Jacques managed a single gurgling scream as claws opened his belly from sternum to groin. Jean fed quickly, tearing out the liver and heart in hot, wet mouthfuls while the cows bellowed

and fled into the dark. The body was found at dawn, half-devoured against a stone wall, entrails strung across the path like red ribbons.Ten days later, on the second of December, the creature struck again near Saugues. Two brothers—twelve-year-old Pierre and his six-year-old sibling—were sent at dusk to fetch firewood from the edge of the forest. Jean waited in the undergrowth, the primeval darkness inside him humming with hunger. He burst out as they bent to gather sticks. The younger boy froze; the older one snatched up a heavy branch and swung wildly.

“Run, little one! Run!” Pierre shouted, striking the Beast across the muzzle.

Jean roared, claws raking the boy’s arm and shoulder, but the child fought like a cornered fox, beating the creature back long enough for both brothers to scramble up a rocky outcrop and scream for help. Villagers arrived with torches and pitchforks; the Beast retreated into the trees, leaving only blood on the snow and the older boy’s torn sleeve.Still the hunger was not satisfied.Before the month ended, two more girls died within days of each other. The first was an eleven-year-old shepherdess tending sheep on the high pasture above La Besseyre-Saint-Mary itself. Jean came upon her at twilight. She never had time to run. He pinned her with his weight, tore out her throat in one clean bite, then ripped open her small chest and fed while the sheep scattered in blind panic. Her body was discovered curled beside a boulder, face gone, ribs picked clean.The second girl, barely ten, was taken on Christmas Eve near the village of Venteuges while carrying a basket of bread to her grandmother. Jean followed her lantern through the falling snow. He dragged her off the path into the pines, dismembered her with savage efficiency—arms torn free, belly opened—and left the remains scattered across twenty paces of frozen ground. The basket lay untouched, snow already covering the loaves.The villages sank deeper into terror. Doors were nailed shut at noon. Women prayed aloud in the lanes. Men sat up all night with guns across their knees. No one understood why the king’s great hunter had failed, why the wolves Antoine had killed had not ended the nightmare.By day Jean Chastel milked the cows, spoke little, and met his wife’s proud eyes without flinching. At night the darkness inside him grew stronger, the last light of his human soul flickering smaller and smaller with every kill.The Gévaudan bled on.

Winter tightened its grip on La Besseyre-Saint-Mary. Snow fell in soft, relentless curtains for three days straight, blanketing the roofs and muffling every sound until the village felt like it had been wrapped in thick wool. Smoke rose straight up from chimneys in the still air, then bent sideways when a rare breath of wind found it. The paths between houses

turned to packed ice; children slid on them with pieces of sacking tied under their boots, laughing until their mothers called them in.Jean woke each morning to the same gray light filtering through the small window. He rose before Anne, pulled on his heaviest wool breeches and the sheepskin coat patched at the elbows, and stepped outside to break the ice on the water trough. The cows lowed softly when they heard his boots crunching snow; he forked hay into the manger, milked them by feel in the half-dark, the warm streams hissing into the pail. His hands moved without thought, but his mind drifted—always drifted—toward the forest line beyond the last stone wall. Even in daylight the pines seemed to lean toward him, patient, waiting.Inside, Anne had the fire going. The smell of barley gruel and woodsmoke filled the room. The twins, Joseph and Jeanne, sat on the floor near the hearth playing with the wooden animals Jean had carved years ago; little Marie clung to Anne's skirt, thumb in her mouth. Pierre and the older boys were already outside splitting logs, their axe strokes ringing clear through the cold.

"Morning," Anne said, ladling gruel into bowls.

She studied his face as she handed him his.

"You look tired again. Did you sleep at all?"Jean sat at the long table.

"Enough." He ate slowly, staring at the fire.

The spoon felt heavy in his hand.Pierre came in stamping snow from his boots.

"The snares are empty again, Father. Not even a rabbit. Everything's gone to ground."

Jean nodded without looking up.

"The cold does that. They'll come back when the thaw starts."

Pierre hesitated.

"Some of the men are talking about another hunt next week. They say the Beast's gone quiet since the snow. Maybe it starved."

Jean's spoon paused halfway to his mouth. A faint, private smile touched his lips, gone before anyone saw it.

"Maybe."Anne set a fresh loaf on the table and cut thick slices.

"Let them hunt if they want. You've done enough running about in the dark. Stay close this winter. The children need their father."

Jean met her eyes. For a moment the old warmth flickered in his chest—the memory of a man who had once promised her safety, who had carried her over the threshold of this very house. Then the darkness stirred again, soft but insistent, and the warmth faded."I'll stay close," he said quietly.After the meal he went to the garden plot, even though the ground was frozen hard. He chipped at the ice with a mattock, clearing space for the

spring planting that felt impossibly far away. Mathieu hobbled past on his stick, bundled in every scrap of wool he owned.

“Morning, Chastel. You hear about the widow Rouquette’s boy? He swears he saw lights moving in the Ténazeyre last night—green ones, dancing like will-o’-the-wisps.”

Jean leaned on the mattock.

“Old stories. The cold plays tricks on the eyes.”

Mathieu snorted. “Cold or not, I’m keeping my shutters barred till spring. That thing’s still out there. I feel it.”

Jean said nothing. Mathieu shuffled on, muttering prayers under his breath.By afternoon the snow eased. Jean walked the lane to the communal oven with a sack of rye. Women stood in line, baskets on hips, breath clouding the air. Their talk was low, fearful.“…found tracks bigger than a man’s hand near the spring,” one said.

“Clawed, they were.”Another crossed herself.

“My Jeanne won’t sleep unless I sit by her bed with the candle burning. She dreams of teeth.”

Jean waited his turn in silence. When the baker’s wife handed him the warm loaves she looked at him oddly.

“You’re quiet these days, Chastel. Not like you.”

He took the bread.

“Winter makes a man quiet.”

She nodded, but her eyes lingered.Back home he stacked the loaves on the shelf. Anne was mending a shirt by the window, needle flashing in the weak light. The children played quietly now; even the twins sensed the heaviness in the air.Jean sat beside her. For a long moment neither spoke.

“You’re different,” she said at last, not looking up from her sewing.

“Since the bite. Since the fever. I see it in your eyes. Like part of you went away and never came back.”

Jean stared at his hands—broad, scarred, steady.

“I’m still here.”

“Are you?” She set the needle down.

“The children feel it too. Pierre asked me yesterday if you were angry with him. Joseph cried in his sleep last week, calling for you.”

Jean swallowed. The darkness inside him coiled tighter, but for once it did not drown everything. A thin thread of the old man remained, fragile as frost on glass.“I’ll try harder,” he said.

“For them. For you.”

Anne reached across and laid her hand over his.

Her fingers were cold.“Then stay inside tonight,” she whispered.

“Just once. Let the forest wait.”

Jean looked at her—really looked.

The lines around her eyes, the gray threading her hair, the love that had endured nine children and years of lean winters. Something cracked inside him, small but real.He nodded once.That night he did not leave the house.He lay beside Anne, listening to her breathe, to the soft snores of the children in the loft. The moon rose outside, silver through the cracks in the shutters. The pull came—strong, familiar, hungry—but for the first time in months he fought it. Not with anger or prayer, but with memory: Anne’s laugh on their wedding day, Pierre’s first steps, the twins chasing each other through summer grass.The darkness snarled and pushed, but he held on.Until dawn.When the first gray light came he rose, exhausted, trembling, but still himself.Outside the snow had stopped. The village lay quiet under its white shroud.Jean stepped into the yard and breathed the cold air. For one morning, at least, the forest waited in vain.But he knew it would not wait forever.

The thaw came slowly, grudgingly, in late February. Icicles that had hung like crystal daggers from the eaves for weeks began to drip, then fall with soft thuds into the softening snow. The paths turned to mud; boots sucked at every step. In La Besseyre-Saint-Mary the villagers emerged like animals from hibernation—cautious, blinking at the pale sun that finally broke through the clouds.Jean worked harder than ever during the day, as though physical exhaustion could keep the darkness at bay. He split firewood until his palms blistered, hauled stones to rebuild the section of wall the frost had heaved apart, mended the roof where meltwater had seeped through the thatch. His shoulders ached, his back burned, but the pain was clean, human, a reminder that he still had a body that could tire and hurt like any other man’s.Pierre helped without being asked. The boy had grown taller over the winter, his voice deepening, his movements surer. They worked side by side one afternoon repairing the stable door, which had warped in the cold.

“You’ve been quiet, Father,” Pierre said, planing a fresh edge on a plank.

“Even for you.”Jean drove a nail home with one hard swing.

“Winter does that.”Pierre glanced sideways.

“It’s more than winter. You look at the forest like it owes you something. Or like you owe it.”

Jean paused, hammer raised. For a moment the old restlessness flared—hot, familiar—but he forced it down.

“The forest is just trees, boy. Nothing more.”

Pierre nodded, but his eyes said he didn’t believe it.That evening the family ate together at the long table. Anne had made a thin stew from the last of the salted pork, thickened with barley and the few root vegetables that had survived the cellar. The twins chattered about a fox they had seen near the spring—“It had a white tip on its tail, Maman, like snow!”—while little Marie banged her wooden spoon on the table in rhythm.

François and Antoine argued over whose turn it was to feed the chickens tomorrow.Jean listened, letting their voices wash over him. For the first time in months the sound didn’t grate; it anchored him. He reached under the table and squeezed Anne’s hand once, brief but firm. She looked at him in surprise, then smiled—a small, tired smile that reached her eyes.After supper the older boys went out to check the snares one last time before full dark. The twins begged for a story. Anne settled them near the hearth with the last of the beeswax candle burning low.

“Tell us about the shepherd who tricked the giant,” Jeanne pleaded.

Anne began the tale in her soft, steady voice—the shepherd boy who outwitted the mountain giant with clever riddles and a bag of clever lies. Jean sat in the big chair, arms folded, watching the firelight play across his children’s faces. The darkness inside him stirred, restless as always when the sun went down, but tonight it felt farther away, muffled by the warmth of the room and the simple rhythm of family.When the story ended and the twins were yawning, Anne carried Marie to bed. Jean stayed by the fire a moment longer, staring into the embers.Pierre came back in, cheeks red from the cold.

“No catches again. But the tracks are old. Whatever’s out there hasn’t been close in days.”

Jean nodded.

“Good.”Pierre lingered in the doorway.

“You’re not going out tonight?”

Jean looked at his eldest son—tall now, almost a man—and felt something crack open inside him, small and painful.

“No,” he said.

“Not tonight.”

Pierre studied him for a long second, then gave a single nod and went to bed.Jean banked the fire, checked the latch on the door, and climbed into bed beside Anne. She was already half-asleep, her breathing slow and even. He lay on his back, staring at the low beams overhead. The moon would rise soon; he could feel its pull like a tide in his blood. But tonight he closed his eyes and pictured the children's faces instead—the twins laughing, Pierre's steady gaze, Marie's small hand clutching his finger.The darkness pushed. He pushed back.Sleep came eventually—fitful, shallow, but it came.Outside, the forest waited under the stars. Silent. Patient.Inside the house, for one more night, Jean Chastel remained a man.

March arrived with a false promise of spring. The snow melted into gray slush that clung to boots and hems; the fields turned to mud churned by every step. In the village the first signs of renewal appeared—women airing out bedding on lines strung between houses, men repairing tools in open sheds, children running barefoot despite the chill, laughing at the squelch under their feet. Smoke from the communal oven carried the scent of fresh rye bread farther than usual on the damp air.Jean kept to the rhythm he had forced upon himself. Dawn milking, midday mending, evening splitting wood until his arms shook. He spoke more to the children now—short questions about their day, a quiet word of praise when Pierre brought in a snare full of rabbits for the first time in months. The boy's face lit up each time; Jean felt the small warmth of it like sunlight on frozen ground.One afternoon he walked with the twins to the spring. Joseph and Jeanne skipped ahead, splashing through puddles, their voices high and bright. Jean carried the yoke and buckets, pace slow. The path was slick; he caught Jeanne's hand when she slipped.

"Look, Papa!" Joseph pointed.

"The ice is gone. The water's running again."

Jean knelt at the spring's edge. The water was clear and cold, bubbling up over mossy stones. He filled the buckets, the sound steady and ordinary. For a moment the forest seemed far away—only trees, only wind in the branches.On the way back Jeanne tugged his sleeve.

"Papa, why don't you tell stories anymore? Like Maman does."

Jean looked down at her small face, flushed from the cold.

"I used to tell them better when I was younger."

"Tell one now," Joseph begged.

"The one about the hunter who found the golden deer."

Jean hesitated. The darkness inside him stirred at the edges, restless as always when he lingered too long on memories of gentleness. But he nodded.

“Once,” he began, voice low, “there was a hunter who lived at the edge of a great forest. Every day he tracked game for his family, but one winter the woods went empty. No tracks, no scent. He grew desperate. Then one night under the full moon he saw a deer with antlers of pure gold. It stood in a clearing and looked at him—not afraid, just… knowing.”

The twins walked slower, eyes wide.

“He followed it,” Jean continued.

“Through briars and snow, deeper than any man had gone. At last the deer stopped by a frozen lake. It spoke—not with words, but in his head. ‘Take one antler,’ it said, ‘and your family will never hunger again. But the forest will remember, and one day it will ask for something back.’”

Joseph swallowed.

“Did he take it?”

Jean looked ahead toward the village roofs rising over the rise.

“He took both. And for years his table was full, his children warm. But every full moon the forest whispered at his window. And one night the whispers became teeth.”

Jeanne clutched his hand tighter.

“What happened then?”

Jean stopped walking.

“He learned that some gifts have teeth of their own. And some debts are paid in blood.”

The twins were silent the rest of the way home.That evening Anne noticed their quiet.

“What story did you tell them?” she asked, stirring the pot over the fire.Jean sat at the table, elbows on his knees.

“An old one. About choices.”

She turned, studying him. “

You used to tell it happier. With a better ending.”

“Some stories don’t have happy endings anymore.”

Anne set the spoon down and came to him. She rested her hands on his shoulders.

“You’re fighting something, Jean. I see it every day. Whatever it is… let me help carry it.”

He reached up and covered one of her hands with his. The touch was real, grounding.

“I’m trying.”She leaned down and kissed the top of his head.

“Try harder. We’re still here.”

Later, when the house slept, Jean stood at the door and looked out. The moon was waxing again, a thin silver crescent climbing the sky. The pull came—steady, familiar, hungry. He gripped the doorframe until his knuckles whitened.He did not step outside.Instead he closed the latch, barred it with the heavy beam, and returned to bed. Anne stirred when he slid under the blankets.

“You stayed,” she murmured, half-asleep.

“I stayed,” he answered.She curled against him. He lay awake a long time, listening to her breathe, to the soft snores from the loft, to the distant drip of meltwater from the eaves.The forest waited beyond the walls.But tonight, the man inside Jean Chastel held the line a little longer.

One Sunday in early April, when the mud had begun to harden into cracked earth and the first green shoots pushed through the garden plot, Jean walked alone to the little stone church in La Besseyre-Saint-Mary. The bell had rung its cracked single note half an hour earlier; most families were already inside. He entered quietly, boots scraping on the worn flagstones, and stood at the back until the last hymn faded.Father Fournier, thin and gray, was extinguishing the altar candles when Jean approached.

“Father,” Jean said, voice low.

“I need a prayer. Together. If you’ll hear me.”

The priest turned, surprise flickering across his lined face.

“Of course, my son. Come to the confessional.”

They stepped behind the carved wooden screen. Jean knelt on the worn kneeler; the priest sat on the other side.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned,” Jean began, the words rusty in his mouth.

“It has been… years since my last confession. I carry dark thoughts. Of anger I cannot control. They come to me. They just come. I fear I am lost.

”Father Fournier was silent a long moment. Then he spoke gently.

“The Devil tempts the strongest souls hardest, Jean. Tell me more if you can.”

Jean’s hands clenched on the edge of the screen.

“I dream of people. Of hate. I wake with the taste of it. I fight it, but the fight grows weaker. I ask God to take it from me, but He is silent.”

The priest drew a slow breath.

“Listen, then.” He opened the small breviary on his lap and read in a calm, steady voice:

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”
The words hung in the dim air. Jean closed his eyes, letting them settle over him like cool water. For a moment the darkness inside receded, thin as mist before sun.
“Say the Act of Contrition with me,” the priest murmured.
Jean repeated the words haltingly, voice cracking on the promise to amend his life. When they finished, Father Fournier made the sign of the cross through the lattice.
“Stay if you wish. Pray. The church is open to you always.”
Jean nodded and rose. He walked to the front pew, knelt on the cold stone before the altar, and bowed his head. The small wooden crucifix above looked down with its carved, suffering eyes. For nearly an hour he stayed there on his knees, hands clasped so tightly the knuckles whitened.
“Take it from me”, he prayed silently. “End this curse. Let me be the man I was. Let my family live without this shadow. I will give anything. Anything.”
No voice answered. No warmth descended. Only the quiet drip of meltwater from the eaves outside and the faint creak of the roof timbers settling.At last he rose, legs stiff, and walked home through the pale afternoon light.He fed the animals first—forked fresh hay to the cows, scattered grain for the chickens, checked the old mare’s hooves for stones. Then he went to the woodpile and chopped until his shirt clung wet to his back, each swing of the axe a small defiance against the thing inside him.Two days later the first sickness came.One of the cows—a good milker, the one that had always given the richest cream—stopped eating. She stood in the stable with her head low, sides heaving. By evening she was down, eyes glassy. Jean knelt beside her, running his hands over her flank, but she only moaned weakly.
“She’s burning up,” Pierre said, holding the lantern high.
“What do we do?”Jean shook his head.
“Nothing we can. She’ll die by morning.”
She did. They dragged the body to the edge of the field and burned it, the stink of singed hair and flesh hanging over the village for days.Then the children fell ill.First Joseph—

feverish, shivering, coughing until his small chest rattled. Then Jeanne followed, cheeks flushed, eyes bright with heat. Marie whimpered in Anne’s arms, too weak to cry properly.Jean sat up nights with them, holding wet cloths to their foreheads, spooning broth past cracked lips. Anne moved between the beds like a ghost, whispering prayers.
“They’ll pull through,” she said one dawn, voice thin.
“They have to.”
But two weeks after the first fever Joseph worsened. The cough turned wet and bloody; his breathing grew shallow, ragged. Jean carried him to the window so he could see the sky one last time.
“Papa,” the boy whispered, hand hot in Jean’s.
“Am I going to die?”
Jean’s throat closed. “No,” he lied. “You’re strong. You’ll be running again soon.”
Joseph smiled faintly, then closed his eyes. By midnight he was gone.Anne’s cry woke the house. She clutched the small body, rocking back and forth, tears soaking the blanket. Pierre stood frozen in the doorway; the twins clung to each other, sobbing. Jean knelt beside the bed, one hand on his wife’s shoulder, the other on his dead son’s chest.No tears came from him. Only a deep, hollow ache—and beneath it, the darkness stirring, almost satisfied.He buried Joseph the next morning in the churchyard under a gray sky. Father Fournier spoke the words over the small grave. Villagers stood at a distance, caps in hands, murmuring condolences.Afterward Anne walked home leaning on Pierre. Jean stayed behind a moment, staring at the fresh mound of earth.He did not pray.He only stood in silence, feeling the curse settle deeper, heavier, like roots pushing into black soil.The forest waited beyond the wall.And now it had taken something more than blood.

Dark times

Deep in the episcopal palace at Mende, long after the canons had retired and the great cathedral bells had fallen silent, the Archbishop sat alone in the private library. A single candle burned on the heavy oak table, its flame guttering in the draft that crept under the ancient door. Shadows danced across shelves lined with leather-bound tomes—some older than the cathedral itself, their spines cracked and titles faded to gold dust. Outside, the night wind moaned through the cloister, but inside only the scratch of a quill and the

occasional turn of a page broke the silence.The Archbishop—his crimson robes laid aside, wearing only a plain black cassock—leaned close to the light, eyes narrowed behind wire spectacles. Before him lay the thick Italian translation of Dom Augustin Calmet's great work, opened to the second dissertation: Dissertazioni sopra le apparizioni de' spiriti, e sopra i vampiri, o i redivivi d'Ungheria, di Moravia ec.

He read slowly, lips moving, inner voice weighing every line.

"Calmet is cautious… pious. He divides apparitions into three: good angels—rare, sent only for divine purpose; demons—ever ready to deceive, appearing as angels of light to lead souls into sin; and souls of the dead—permitted by God alone, usually to warn or beg prayers. Most 'ghosts,' he says, are demonic illusions or mere dreams. And the vampires… ah, the vampires of Hungary and Moravia."

His finger traced the text. Calmet had examined official reports, exhumations, bodies found undecayed with fresh blood in the mouth. Stakes through hearts. Yet the good Abbot remained rational: premature burial, plague hysteria, natural delayed decomposition in cold soil.

"If these stories were true," Calmet wrote, "the reasons given would be frivolous and subtle."

Demonic possession of corpses he allowed as possible—but superstition must not become dogma.The Archbishop closed the volume with a sigh and reached for another, older book.

Discours des Sorciers by Henri Boguet, 1608 edition. Then Jean de Nynauld's De la Lycanthropie, transformation et extase des sorciers, Paris 1615. And the grim Malleus Maleficarum, its pages yellowed and stained.

He opened Boguet first.

The judge from Saint-Claude had presided over dozens of trials. Werewolves—loups-garous—confessed under torture to rubbing on diabolical ointments of belladonna, wolfsbane, and human fat, then donning a wolf-skin belt given by the Devil at the sabbath. Pierre Bourgot and Michel Verdung had admitted running as wolves, killing and eating children. The Gandillon family—whole clans—claimed to transform and hunt together. Boguet described the salve that caused ecstasy and shape-shifting, the crossroads pacts, the way the human soul remained trapped inside the beast, watching in horror.

Nynauld was more medical, yet still fearful: lycanthropy could be a delusion caused by melancholy, but true cases involved demonic illusion or real metamorphosis granted by

Satan. The wolf-form was smaller, stouter, red-furred, with a stumpy tail—exactly matching the Gévaudan descriptions.

The Archbishop leaned back, candlelight flickering across his tired face. His inner voice raced.

”Is this what stalks the Margeride? A loup-garou—man by day, wolf by night? Or a vampire-like revenant, a corpse animated by demons to drink blood and spread terror? Calmet would say hysteria, natural causes, mass fear. But Boguet and Nynauld saw the Devil’s hand directly. The Beast walks on hind legs, bounds impossible distances, ignores bullets… smells of brimstone. It kills like a wolf yet reasons like a man.”

He turned another page in the Malleus, reading the section on shape-shifting witches. Demons could not truly change substance—only illusion—but with God’s permission (or through pacts) real transformation occurred as punishment or temptation.

The Archbishop rubbed his eyes.

The candle had burned low; wax pooled on the table like congealed blood.

“Lord, grant me wisdom,” he whispered into the darkness.

“Is this creature of flesh, or spirit, or something between? A demon in wolf’s skin? A cursed soul? Or—God forgive the thought—something the Church herself has unwittingly awakened by our weakness in these enlightened times?”

No answer came, only the wind outside and the faint creak of old timbers.

He closed the books one by one, stacked them carefully, and sat staring into the dying flame.

Somewhere in the Gévaudan, the Beast still walked.And here, in the heart of the Church, an old man wondered whether reason or faith—or neither—would ever be enough to name it.

Late in 1765 the attacks seemed to falter. For three weeks the forest stayed silent. No new graves were dug. In Saugues and La Besseyre-Saint-Mary the women began to unbar their doors at twilight. Children ventured as far as the spring again. Old Mathieu sat on his bench in the weak December sun and declared, “The Lord has heard us at last. The Beast has gone back to hell.”Then the surge came, worse than before.Near Saugues, on a frozen morning in January, a twenty-three-year-old woman named Catherine was found on the path to the mill, throat torn wide, body dragged twenty paces and partly eaten—ribs picked clean, one arm missing. Two days later, in the pastures above La Besseyre-Saint-Mary itself, a fourteen-year-old shepherd boy vanished. They found only his wooden crook

and a patch of blood-soaked snow. By the end of February the tally had climbed again: dozens more kills in the hamlets around Paulhac, Chanaleilles, and the high slopes of Mont Mouchet.When the final count was whispered in the churches, it was almost too terrible to speak aloud—more than two hundred attacks in all, one hundred and five souls dead, forty-nine others left maimed and screaming in their sleep. Of those who died, ninety-eight had been partly eaten.The king’s orders came like thunder: the largest hunt the Gévaudan had ever seen. Poisoning campaigns first—carcasses laced with strychnine and arsenic dragged through every forest track. Then the giant beat hunts. Thirty thousand peasants were summoned by royal decree, marching in long lines across the ridges, armed with pitchforks, scythes, old muskets, and sheer desperation.They searched by day and by night. Torches moved through the pines like fireflies in hell. Men walked shoulder to shoulder, calling to one another so no one would be left alone.

“Stay close! For God’s sake, stay close!”

One night near the Ténazeyre, a party of twenty from La Besseyre-Saint-Mary beat the undergrowth for hours. Branches whipped their faces, leaving long bloody scratches. Old Mathieu slipped on a root and fell hard; his leg snapped with a wet crack that echoed through the trees. He screamed until they carried him out on a litter, face white as bone.

“Curse this devil!” a young farmer spat, wiping blood from a gash across his cheek. “We’ve walked every inch of these woods twice over. Nothing but shadows and howls that stop the moment we turn.”

His companion, a miller from Saugues, clutched his torch tighter.

“I saw something last night—two yellow eyes, higher than a man’s head. It watched us from the ridge, then vanished. No tracks. No sound. Just… gone.”

Another hunter, voice shaking, muttered, “My wife won’t let the children out even to piss. Says she hears breathing at the shutters. We’re hunting a ghost.”

They found nothing. No lair, no corpse, no wounded beast. Only the same huge prints that appeared and disappeared on rocky ground, and that foul stench that lingered for hours after every sighting.In the morning the lines formed again—thirty thousand men stretching for miles across the Margeride. They beat the forests from dawn until the light failed, shouting, firing into every thicket. Poisoned meat lay untouched. Silver bullets were wasted on ordinary wolves. Men broke ankles in hidden holes, slashed their hands on thorns, wept from exhaustion and fear.At night around the campfires the talk was always the same.

“We’ll never catch it,” one man said, staring into the flames.

“It’s not of this world.”Another crossed himself.

“Then why does God let it walk? What sin have we committed that deserves this?”
No one had an answer.The hunts ended in failure. The poison rotted unused. The thirty thousand peasants went home poorer, more terrified, and no safer than before.In La Besseyre-Saint-Mary, Jean Chastel stood at his doorway one evening and watched the last torch-bearing line disappear into the trees. His face was calm. Inside, the darkness purred with satisfaction.The Beast had won again.

The winter of 1765–1766 dragged on in uneasy quiet. Snow fell thick and silent, burying the tracks of man and beast alike. In Saugues the villagers dared to hope the cold had driven the monster into some deep lair, never to emerge. Doors stayed unbarred a little longer each evening. Children played in the lanes again, their laughter thin but real. Jean Chastel chopped wood until his breath steamed in clouds, fed the animals, spoke softly to Anne when the house was quiet. The darkness inside him simmered low, patient, waiting for the thaw.Then came the second of December 1765.Two boys from a farmstead just outside Saugues—Pierre, twelve years old and sturdy for his age, and his little brother Claude, only six—were sent at dusk to fetch the last armfuls of firewood from the copse behind the house. The sky was the color of bruised iron; a thin wind cut through their wool coats. Pierre carried the lantern, its small flame dancing in the glass. Claude clung to his brother’s sleeve, whispering,
“It’s getting dark, Pierre. Maman said not to stay out.”
“We’ll be quick,” Pierre answered, voice steady.
“Just a few sticks and we’re home.”
They reached the edge of the trees. The copse was dense, branches heavy with snow. Pierre bent to gather dry twigs when the growl came—low, wet, from the shadows to their left.Claude whimpered. Pierre dropped the lantern and snatched up a thick branch, holding it like a club.
“Stay behind me!”
The Beast stepped into the lantern light.Tawny coat streaked with black, the dark stripe running the length of its back like spilled ink. Larger than any wolf, eyes burning yellow. It lowered its head and advanced, jaws parted.Pierre swung the branch with all his strength. The wood cracked against the creature’s shoulder. It snarled, recoiling for one heartbeat, then lunged. Pierre shoved Claude toward the open field.
“Run! Run to the house! Don’t stop!”
The little boy bolted, sobbing, legs pumping through the snow.

Pierre stood his ground, swinging again. The branch struck the Beast across the muzzle; blood—its blood—spattered dark on the white ground. The creature roared, claws raking Pierre's arm and chest, tearing wool and skin. Pain exploded white-hot. Pierre screamed but kept swinging, driving the jagged end of the broken branch into the Beast's flank. It recoiled again, staggering, then turned and bounded into the trees, vanishing as suddenly as it had come.Pierre dropped to his knees, blood soaking his coat, breath coming in ragged gasps. Claude reached the farmhouse door and screamed for their mother. Neighbors came running with torches. They found Pierre still kneeling in the snow, branch clutched in bloody hands, staring at the dark line of trees where the beast had fled.He lived. The wounds were deep—three long gashes across his chest, one arm torn to the bone—but he lived. The village spoke of nothing else for weeks.

"A boy of twelve fought it off," they whispered in the churchyard and at the oven.

"With nothing but a stick. God was with him."

Yet the hope the winter had kindled flickered and died.Spring 1767 came late, wet, and cruel. The snow melted into rivers of mud that turned every path into a quagmire. The first green shoots appeared, then withered under relentless rain. And with the thaw the attacks resumed—slow at first, then swift and merciless. Near Lorcières a shepherdess was taken at midday, her flock scattered, her body found hours later with the throat gone and the belly opened. In the high pastures above Paulhac two children gathering early herbs vanished; only one shoe and a bloodied ribbon were recovered. By May the fear had returned full force—doors barred at noon, children kept indoors, men walking in pairs even to the spring.In La Besseyre-Saint-Mary, Anne kept the twins close, never letting them out of sight. Pierre, now fifteen and scarred across the chest from that December night, carried a knife everywhere. Jean worked the fields in silence, his face a mask. The darkness inside him had grown thick and comfortable, no longer fighting to surface—it simply was.One evening Anne watched him from the doorway as he sharpened the scythe by the last light.

"You're going out again tonight," she said.

Not a question.Jean tested the blade with his thumb.

"The Beast is back. Someone has to hunt it."

She stepped closer.

"You're not hunting it, Jean. You're hunting something else. And it's winning."

He looked at her then—really looked. The lines on her face deeper, the gray in her hair brighter. The weight of Joseph's grave still lay between them like a stone.

“I’m trying,” he said quietly.
“Try harder,” she answered, voice breaking. “For the ones still alive.”
He nodded once, set the scythe aside, and went inside.That night he stayed.But the forest beyond the village waited, patient as ever, and the spring killings continued without pause.

On the night of 19 June 1767, Jean Chastel left his house.He carried the flintlock musket slung across his back and the long hunting knife at his belt. The moon rode low, bloated and silver, but Jean forced the change down with every step. His muscles trembled, his vision sharpened unnaturally, the scents of the forest assaulted him—pine resin, wet earth, distant blood—but he walked as a man. He would end this as a man.He moved deep into the Ténazeyre, past familiar trails, until he reached the rocky hollow a kilometer from the witch’s moss-roofed hut. There he crouched among the ferns, back against a granite outcrop, musket across his knees. He waited.Two hours passed in silence broken only by the wind and the occasional hoot of an owl.Then the bushes stirred.The witch’s beast stepped into the open clearing—enormous, tawny-red coat streaked with black, the long tufted tail flicking, yellow eyes catching the moonlight like coins. It lifted its head, sniffing the air, sensing something wrong.Jean rose slowly to one knee. He drew a single steady breath, sighted along the barrel, and squeezed the trigger.The shot cracked like thunder across the slopes. The ball struck the beast clean through the left eye and out the back of the skull. It staggered once, jaws gaping in a silent roar, then collapsed in a heap of twitching limbs and dark blood.Jean walked forward without haste. He drew the knife, seized the massive head by the ears, and sawed through the thick neck in methodical strokes until it came free. Blood soaked his hands to the wrists. He left the body where it lay and dragged the severed head by its tufted tail all the way down the mountain to the church at La Besseyre-Saint-Mary.Dawn was breaking when he reached the square. Villagers gathered at the sound of his boots on the stones. He stood in the center, blood-streaked and silent, and lifted the monstrous head high.
“I killed it,” he said.
“Near La Sogne d’Auvers, on the slopes of Mont Mouchet. This is the Beast.”
The head passed from hand to hand. Men crossed themselves. Women wept openly. Father Fournier fell to his knees. Within hours the news flew across the Gévaudan. Jean Chastel was carried on shoulders through the villages. The Marquis d’Apcher embraced him. Messengers galloped for Versailles. For the first time in three terrible years the people dared to believe the nightmare was finished.That same night Jean returned alone to the

witch’s hut.The moment he crossed the threshold the change seized him—bones cracking, fur surging, muzzle lengthening. He entered on all fours, a towering werewolf, eyes burning gold.The old woman sat by the fire in her black cloak, wart on her cheek, rotten teeth bared in fury.

“You killed my beast,” she hissed, rising on filthy bare feet.

“My loyal friend. My creation. For this betrayal—”

She raised one crooked finger. The air turned thick, cold, heavy with power.Jean felt the curse rising, the same dark force that had ruled him for long years. But something else rose with it—rage, grief, the last ember of the man who had once loved his wife and children, who had buried a son and still walked home each dawn.He roared—a sound that shook the timbers of the hut—and lunged.The witch’s eyes widened. She tried to speak the final words of the curse, but Jean’s jaws closed on her throat before the syllables could form. He tore once, hard. Blood sprayed across the hearth. The old woman collapsed, gurgling, eyes already glazing. The dark power recoiled, faltered, then shattered like glass.Jean staggered back. The transformation reversed in reverse agony—fur receding, bones snapping into human shape, muzzle shortening. He stood naked and trembling, a man again.He looked once at the crumpled body by the fire, then turned and ran.He ran into the deepest heart of the forest, past every trail he had ever known, until the trees grew so thick the moonlight could not reach the ground. There, miles from any human path, he collapsed on moss and slept.When he woke at dawn he was still human. No pull of the moon. No scent of blood calling him. The curse was broken—not by prayer, not by silver, but by the final act of defiance that had severed the witch’s hold.The killings in the Gévaudan ended that night.Jean Chastel returned home at sunrise. Anne met him at the door, eyes wide. He said nothing, only held her until the trembling stopped. He never spoke of the hut, the beast, or the witch.

He lived quietly for the rest of his days—farming, hunting only what his family needed, teaching his surviving children the old stories with happier endings. He died peacefully in his bed on 14 March 1789, at the age of eighty-one, surrounded by grandchildren and the woman who had never stopped loving him.Hundreds of years later, in the early twenty-first century, a modest stone monument was raised in the square of La Besseyre-Saint-Mary. It shows a man with a musket and a severed wolf’s head at his feet. The inscription reads:

JEAN CHASTEL
Qui tua la Bête du Gévaudan
19 juin 1767
Héros de la Margeride

Tourists photograph it. Schoolchildren are taught the tale of the heroic hunter who ended the terror. Guides tell dramatic versions of the story.

Little do they know.